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Using phenomenology in careers research: student experiences of unpaid work

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ABSTRACT

Career guidance has been criticised for focusing on individual agency, complying with discourses that "responsibilise" individuals to manage their careers. A social justice approach argues for a more nuanced recognition of the interplay of structure and agency, which raises questions about how to do this in practice? In this paper we argue for the value of interpretive phenomenology which challenges what is taken-for-granted, illuminates the nature of shared experience and enables a deeper understanding of individuals within their environment. Through interviews with higher education students and recent graduates, we illustrate how experiences of unpaid work are intricately interwoven with biography, relationships, location and resources over time. We illustrate how a . pragmatic phenomenological approach offers valuable theoretical tools for socially just guidance practice and research.

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Introduction

Phenomenology is both a philosophical movement and a family of qualitative research methodologies, focusing on "people's perceptions of the world in which they live and what it means to them" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 4). Its purpose is to study phenomena as they appear to someone in their conscious experience (Moran, 2000). This article explores how a "phenomenology-inspired" approach (Van Manen, 2017) to researching unpaid work experiences can enhance our understanding of the wider "student experience". Van Manen (1990, 2014) has demonstrated the application of phenomenology within the context of pedagogy, evocatively illustrating how experiences can be explored through five dimensions (or "existentials"): corporeality (body), spatiality (space, location), relationality (relationships and connections with others), temporality (past, present and future) and materiality (things). The application of this lens aligns with a social justice approach to career guidance especially in UK higher education in which career development policy and practice has pivoted to the employability agenda. Employability policy is dominated by concerns about human capital, national competitiveness and labour market returns (Marginson, 2019; Tholen, 2013), which ignore the more complex landscape of how students and graduates reflect upon and experience careers. A phenomenological orientation and using van Manen's existentials as a

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framework for inquiry can expand the focus beyond outcomes to understand how career choices and compromises are made.

The fundamental question underpinning phenomenological enquiry is "What is this or that kind of experience like?" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). The research study reported upon in this article sought to understand how university students and early career graduates, at a key stage of transition in their academic and working lives, accessed and undertook different forms of unpaid work experience alongside their studies (& life) to enhance their employment prospects. A further question this article addresses is "what is it like to "do phenomenology" as a careers professional?"

The research context is important for interpretive forms of phenomenology as it stresses that individuals are always in an environing world, meaning that context influences the understanding of their experiences (Heidegger, 1998/1927). Contextual factors at the time of this research (conducted in 2015) included a steep increase in tuition fees (rising from £3000 to £9000 per year in 2012) and a growth of the "widening participation agenda" which encouraged greater access to higher education of "non-traditional" applicants (based on criteria such as disability, being "first in family" or domicile in low participation postcodes). In addition, this cohort of students faced the prospect of competing with a growing number of graduates for high quality employment, leading many university staff to highlight to students that "a degree is not enough" (Tomlinson, 2008) and advise them to develop their CVs while still working hard for their degrees. As a result, many students, including those in this study, undertake CV-building activities such as internships, work experiences, international placements and volunteering to build "career capitals" (De Fillippi & Arthur, 1994).

In this article, we draw upon data collected from interviews with 24 students and graduates conducted in 2015. The research focused upon students and graduates who were neither the highest-flying elite nor the lowest achieving or disengaged. As Roberts (2013) argues, such young people are "getting by" and could be described as the "missing middle" in research about transition. The students and graduates in this study were an important group to focus upon as they occupy a position in society which is relatively powerless (e.g. lack of capitals, particularly economic) yet they have scope for mobility due to the development of their career capital in gaining higher qualifications. Those who participated proved to be ideal for a phenomenological study as they were able to reflexively articulate their experiences.

This article begins by outlining extant literature on graduate employability, career development and unpaid work experience. It goes on to introduce phenomenology, and then describes the research study, before explaining the process of analysis which led to findings that are presented through participant interview data. Utilising van Manen's "existentials", we highlight the complexity of student and graduate experiences and sense-making, that risk being ignored in public debates about graduate careers. We conclude by reflecting upon the utility of phenomenology and its implications for research, practice and policy.

The importance of work experience for employability

Historical context is fundamental to phenomenological research, so it is useful to establish the picture of graduate employability which has emerged from different schools of thought including labour market studies, education, management and career guidance and development (Burke & Christie, 2018; Tomlinson & Holmes, 2016). The graduate employability literature as a fairly distinct field from career development and guidance (Healy et al., 2020) has responded to a growing, though contested, interest in the relationship between employment and higher education from varied stakeholders including employers, policymakers, universities and graduates themselves.

Concepts of career capitals (Brown & Wond, 2019; De Fillippi & Arthur, 1994) and graduate capitals (Tomlinson et al., 2017) have become popular in describing the skills and capabilities graduates need to attain in order to secure and flourish in work. Work experience is seen as an important way in which graduates develop what Tomlinson and his co-authors (Tomlinson et al., 2017) describe as human, social, cultural, identity and psychological capital which illustrate graduate resources and

readiness for the labour market. Other research has explored the pre-professional identity (Jackson, 2016) that early interaction with employers through work experience confers and how the process of "becoming a graduate" requires engagement in work environments (Holmes, 2015) even before careers officially begin.

Research also identified the unequal access to quality career and work experiences (Bathmaker et al., 2016) and the trading of high-quality unpaid internships has been criticised by the Sutton Trust (Cullinane & Montacute, 2018) and successive State of the Nation Reports (e.g. Social Mobility Commission, 2019). The perceived competitive nature of the graduate job market and enduring assumptions about a "war for talent" (Brown et al., 2004) contribute to entrenched inequalities in access to high quality work experience, despite many employer claims to embrace greater equality in access to such opportunities.

In this context, many students and graduates know that securing work experience is crucial for their CV and may feel they have little choice but for this to be unpaid. Unpaid work experience may include volunteering, live university projects, unpaid work shadowing as well as more extended unpaid work experience. In some cases, individuals may not only be unpaid but also pay to get experience (e.g. in prestigious overseas volunteering projects guaranteed to make a CV attractive). Underscoring such employability-related activities are assumptions that society is meritocratic and that if students work hard, gaining academic and work credentials, success as a graduate will follow (Young, 2017).

There has been considerable public and professional attention to the ethics of different types of unpaid work. Ongoing regular charity volunteering is considered justifiable in contrast to extended unpaid work in a large private sector organisation. AGCAS, the professional association for careers services in HE in the UK has engaged in ongoing work to limit unpaid internships (AGCAS, 2021). Despite such activity, many practitioners are regularly faced with ethical dilemmas in their discussions with students about options which include unpaid work (Buzdugan, 2020). For some this may feel like "emotionally dirty work" as they compromise their own values in the work they do (e.g. McMurray & Ward, 2014).

The UK government argues that it seeks to put students "at the heart of the system" (Thompson & Bekhradnia, 2011) and universities are compelled to enhance "the student experience", however students' experiences can be complex, diverse and afford freedom to choose their actions from a vast range of possibilities. As Tomlinson (2008) suggests, they are not simply rational or homogenous consumers of an education commodity. However, they do share many aspects of experience, e.g. the investment of time, resources and hope in their future, alongside navigating the challenges of the past and present. In the UK, students and graduates are surveyed through tools such as Careers Registration, the National Student Survey, Graduate Outcomes and in-house teaching evaluations. However, such surveys are often framed around a consumer relationship and questions of return on investment rather than more nuanced individual lived experiences (Christie et al., 2020). The research reported upon in this article explores a feature of student and graduate experience not addressed in typical surveys, that is, "What is it like being a student or graduate undertaking unpaid work at this time/in this context?" Such a phenomenological approach can contribute a deeper understanding of students' experiences of career thinking.

Introducing phenomenology

Truth, according to positivist approaches, is based upon the Greek word "veritas" which relates to the kind of objective fact which may be "proven" by method of logic. Phenomenology aligns itself instead with the Greek concept "alitheia" – an uncovering or revealing of meaning. There are multiple derivations of phenomenology, most drawing on Husserl's descriptive and Heidegger's interpretive approaches. Husserl's version of phenomenology has been classified as "transcendental" – a universal philosophic method, that focuses purely on phenomena and describing them as they appear through the consciousness of individuals (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl (1931) is acknowledged for his concept of the *lifeworld*, a schema for describing and classifying lived subjective experiences.

However, because these experiences are not readily accessible, the aim of phenomenology is to return to these taken-for-granted experiences and to re-examine them (Hitzler & Eberle, 2004). Husserl (1931) refers to the concept of *essences,* i.e. the essential structures of subjective experiences "that without which an object of a particular kind cannot be thought" (Husserl, 1973, p. 341). He believed that to grasp pure essence, the researcher must return to the immediate experience and hold on to it by a kind of intuition. For Husserl this can be accomplished through *phenomenological reduction*, which requires the phenomenological "epoche" or "bracketing", whereby researchers suspend assumptions about a phenomenon and focus on the participants' direct experience. For Husserl, it is essential for the phenomenologist to suspend all held beliefs about the world – not in the sense of doubting their existence, but rather detaching from them or even putting them aside.

Contrary to Husserl's idea of reduction, Heidegger (1998/1927) advanced the application of phenomenology with an emphasis on interpreting human experience (and fundamentally the nature of existence) without fully being detached, instead considering the human experience of being (*Dasein*) which is fundamentally rooted in the world. Heidegger's attempts to interpret individuals' experiences and the impossibility of producing objective descriptions of reality are prominent in the field of organisation studies, such as social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), since descriptions are always going to be coloured by historical, cultural and linguistic understandings of reality (Sandberg, 2000). Heidegger (1998/1927) also argued that there is no such thing as one phenomenology, hence scholars such as Gadamer (1960), Van Manen (1990) and Smythe (2011) have generated different typologies.

Van Manen (1990) straddles both descriptive and interpretive phenomenology and contributes a pragmatic and creative approach to phenomenology which draws upon theoretical literature about the "lifeworld" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and applies them to the field of education. For van Manen, phenomenology aims to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence. He therefore suggests that phenomenologists should seek the essence of a phenomenon (in our case the essence of unpaid work) and compares his approach with artistic endeavour, describing his phenomenology as a "poetizing project" (Van Manen, 1984) that seeks to speak to the world rather than of the world. His work draws on Merleau-Ponty's focus on the relationship between consciousness and somatic (bodily) experiences (Moran, 2000) and how this leads individuals to connect with one another through an expressive, ambiguous space of "intercorporeality" (a space that exists among and between our bodies). Similarly, van Manen identified four existential themes (1990; and in 2014 extended this to include a fifth) that are "fundamental structures of experience" and "productive categories for the process of phenomenological question posing, reflecting and writing" (1990, p. 102). These are corporeality *(lived body);* relationality (*lived human relationships*); spatiality (*lived space*); temporality (*lived time*) and materiality (*lived things*). These existentials are congruent with a systems approach to careers (McMahon & Patton, 1995) as they acknowledge the interplay of individual, contextual and temporal dimensions and chance, however, the phenomenon being studied is the ultimate focal point (essence) accessed through the voice of the individual.

Methodology

Participants

The data presented in this article draws from research with 24r students and recent graduates from three North West universities (ethical approval was obtained from the sponsor university). The sample was achieved through purposive and snowball techniques as the priority in phenomenology is to find participants with detailed experience of the phenomenon being studied. It included eighteen females and six males from a range of degree disciplines; sixteen of whom were white-British, two Eastern European, six Asian British and one other. Most were aged under 23 and first in their family to go to university. Based on questioning participants, most could be considered ambiguously working or middle class based on factors such as family occupational background or home domicile.

Interviews were conducted by the first author face-to-face or via Skype and were semi- or "loosely-structured" (Gordon, 2016, p. 23) to create a space for participants to narrate their experiences. Permission was sought to follow up what they were doing after graduation. Pseudonyms are used in data presentation to maintain anonymity. NVivo software was used to organise data.

Phenomenological approach

Philosophically and analytically, a presupposition of phenomenology is that reflective accounts are not 100% accurate descriptions of what *actually* happened, but this is not problematic as the focus is upon the participant's subjective experience of it. The aim is to get as close as possible to the experience itself rather than participant's retrospective thoughts and feelings about it. The research question asked was "what is it like for students and graduates to undertake unpaid work experience?" Using such an inductive question enables researchers to keep an open mind and not prejudge what they might discover.

Van Manen's existentials (2014, 1990) were utilised to organise and focus attention on different aspects of experience (embodiment, relationships, spatial context, time and material things). Although there are no prescribed methods, phenomenology offers some thinking tools which distinguish it from other kinds of qualitative analysis. "Epoche" and "reduction" describe necessary attitude and attention towards the object of study. Van Manen (2017) laments the attempts of some scholars to turn phenomenology into a scientific method (e.g. Smith et al., 2009). He describes interpretive research as a craft or a scholarship that is to be learnt from reading good examples of phenomenological texts and from "turning towards" the topic, that is immersing oneself as the researcher and adopting a sense of "wonder". Research is not clearly delineated into progressive stages, like positivist research, but oscillates between the parts and the whole, continuously revisiting and reinterpreting. Part of the process of analysis is writing and rewriting to distil meaning rather than merely to record outcomes.

Phenomenology (and qualitative research in general) is often criticised as being "subjective" and lacking reliability and validity (e.g. Paley, 2017). However, these are concepts of value that are invented and reinforced through positivist paradigms and are not fit for purpose. Long and Johnson (2000, p. 31) argue that qualitative researchers should accept that "reliability is unlikely to be a demonstrable strength of their work". Phenomenology makes no claim to be reliable or replicable as it is rooted in context and time so that the same questions asked on a different day, in a different mood and with a different researcher almost certainly would be quite different. Polkinghorne (1983) argues that "trustworthiness" is a more useful aspiration and can be ascertained through vividness, accuracy, richness and elegance. We sought credibility of our data by allowing participants space to express themselves freely about their experiences of unpaid work, clarified key issues with participants during the interview. In addition, the second and third author read through all the identified themes based on the interview transcripts and agreed that the interpretation was useful in making sense of the data.

In this article, we draw upon data which best illustrate the phenomenon of interest and phenomenology as an orientation with the caveat that condensing such findings into a few headline generalisations or conclusions is not ideal (Van Manen, 1990, p. 22). The customary heading of "findings" is not entirely congruent with phenomenology as it suggests that the researcher has discovered something simply waiting to be found, whereas the nature of phenomenological observations is that findings depend on the researcher, participants and the context (including literature and social discourses). Churchill (2018) uses the Latin term "capta" which represents a transformation rather than simply a repetition of the data. Moreover, the aim is not to answer a question definitively or to test a hypothesis, rather to shed light on a matter, even to raise more questions and stimulate further thinking and debate (Smythe, 2011).

In accordance with Van Manen's (1984, p. 4) "procedural activities" of phenomenological research, the first author conducted thematic analyses to determine experiential themes of unpaid work, and then described the phenomenon by using quotes from the interviews; this required multiple sessions of revision to become "depthful" (van Manen, 1990). Third, all authors engaged in reflexivity,

where we considered how we act toward and understand the participants, to interpret and distil into the "essence" of the unpaid work phenomenon for students. Finally, we turned to the philosophy of Heidegger for deeper interpretation to construct textual expression.

What's it like for a student doing unpaid work?

The existential themes are presented in order of interest and significance to us, as researchers. They are intrinsically interlinked so some of the quotes could relate to more than one existential. Use of the "existentials" does not foreclose our analysis but serves as an expansive tool for framing emergent themes.

Relationality (lived relationships)

Other people featured strongly in interviews, for example, family members, professionals such as teachers and careers advisers and peers/friends.

Many of the unpaid opportunities undertaken by the participants were found by word of mouth and people they knew. This illustrates that knowing people, or having family and friends who know people, who can provide opportunities (even unpaid) helps to give students a head start in their career. In contrast, many of the participants did not have this network or know "the right people" to open doors for them. Harriet acknowledges the "taken-for-grantedness" of contacts when talking about work-shadowing a GP:

> I got that only purely because I know someone who knows someone, which is very often the way (Harriet)

An accepted reason for undertaking work experience is to build "social capital" (useful networks and contacts) which was alluded to in interviews but never labelled explicitly. However, participants also eschewed the idea that people they met through unpaid work were simply useful contacts. There was evidence that some work relationships developed into close friendships:

> Some people think it's wasting my time, but I think it's gaining amazing experiences, I met some amazing people, I met my boyfriend for god's sake (Imogen)

A key benefit of unpaid work for some of the participants was the genuine and transformative relationships they build through widening their horizons. Zahir describes how a mentor in his community volunteering was instrumental in supporting his experiences. Her belief and trust in his abilities gave him the confidence to develop and to progress to more adventurous and risky opportunities (such as a paid internship in Asia):

> [She] is the woman who sort of basically changed me as a person completely … it was really humbling that she had the trust in me because when I was doing these events I was 18 or something … yeah she's definitely been one of the biggest influences on my life, definitely (Zahir)

An implication for us, as educators/careers professionals, was the importance of both explicitly acknowledging and discussing notions of career capitals (e.g. social capital) whilst also emphasising how unpaid work can catalyse genuine, life-enhancing relationships.

Social comparisons with peers alluded to a tension between fitting in or standing out from the crowd. Some students had friends on their course (even living together) whilst competing with them for valuable internships and jobs:

> I feel like nowadays it's just the norm, like people would think I was silly if I didn't get any work experience or they'd think I wasn't serious about getting a job in the future if I wasn't prepared to work unpaid … I feel like there's social pressure to do it as well from peers because I think everyone's quite competitive amongst themselves, who's got a grad job first, who's got the most experience, you don't want to be left behind (Mary)

This feeling of competing for scarce successes started for many, including Mary, during high school (if not before).

Temporality (lived time)

For students and graduates in transition, temporality was a defining dimension of their experiences as they were undertaking unpaid work in the present for future reward. Escaping a less-advantaged past and lack of opportunity was a strong motivator for some.

"Pre-careers" started long before graduation, with school work experiences which were often described as intrinsically boring but a valuable currency:

> I think it really helped to start young because every job you apply for will need experience so even if you have a tiny bit of experience that leads to a bit more experience that leads to longer experience, it helps every step (Mary)

Whilst educators may celebrate students who are proactive in gaining work experience from a young age this also raises questions about when a "career" begins (or should begin) and whether work-related stress in young people is something to be accepted as "normal" in society?

Attitudes towards student debt expanding into the future were a recurrent concern. Participants often postponed concerns until an undefined future date with many unaware of how much they had accrued or preferring not to think about it. Arguably, this "sense-making" of deferral enabled many young people to go to university who might not have otherwise:

> It would have bothered me more if I'd have left university with £9000 debt because I would have felt a need to pay that back whereas it's like £42,000 so it just doesn't bother me at all because I think 'I'm never gonna pay that back … Every single person I know has been through University so we're all in exactly the same boat (Sarah)

Many were prepared to accept a certain level of present sacrifice in order to secure a better future. They felt their investment of money and effort in education would guarantee success which was not always the case:

> I was very naive and I've told everybody this because I really want people to learn from the fact that I was one of those people who thought "I've got this certificate now, bring me the jobs", you know and I really did think that the jobs would just pour in and I was quite shocked when actually they didn't and the piece of paper that I'd gained meant nothing without experience and contacts, it was just a piece of paper (Kayla)

Kayla urged us to prepare students honestly and adequately for a rocky transition post-graduation. She described it as the worst year of her life. Participants could take at least a year to settle into a "successful" job and yet a positive discovery of this study (and maintaining contact with participants) was that many did eventually secure quality "graduate level" jobs despite their challenges and perceived disadvantages. Imagined success for the future is a subjective concept though, as Zahir expressed:

> All I want to do in life is have amazing stories to tell my grandkids and … I think that will come through just, not always taking the more risky option but just taking the option that feels right"

Corporeality (lived body)

Participants' experiences were framed by their biographic characteristics (e.g. gender, age, health, disability, ethnic or regional origin) which could disadvantage them in the future labour market so compelling them to undertake unpaid work to compensate.

Unpaid work was described in fundamentally embodied terms, for example, the physical stress and tiredness of juggling jobs and study:

> I worked at a music festival from the Friday night so I got back home at about six in the morning on the Monday, had a shower and went straight to the first day of my internship and because you may be getting four hours sleep a night at this festival and I'd been working pretty much solidly I was like "oh God I'm so tired" I fell asleep standing up on my feet (Rachel)

Mental health was a pervasive theme throughout the interviews as students felt pressure to achieve in their studies, support themselves with paid work and deal with personal issues and commitments.

Ella described her family as "working-class" and herself as "middle-class" as she proactively sought opportunities to improve her social standing through work, activities and socialising. She disclosed that the pressure to be socially and geographically mobile had contributed to acute anxiety during placements in London and China:

> The anxiety got to me a little bit and I could feel myself starting to panic … but I recognised that it was about throwing yourself into it and if you didn't integrate you're not gonna get the full experience (Ella)

Jack accepted unpaid work as inevitable for a young, working-class student, particularly in his chosen career of journalism:

> It's just the way it goes, it's only once you start moving up, once you've got a more valuable skill set as it were … so it's more around the (age) 16–18 mark or 16–20 mark where you're not getting paid then after that I think there's more opportunities for you to actually make some kind of money from it, even if it's only minor (Jack)

His quote echoes the assumption of steady and meritocratic career progression on graduation which was an enduring theme.

Spatiality (lived world)

A sense of home and belonging were dominant themes for many of the participants. Fascinating insights emerged about how these North of England students and graduates felt torn, believing London offered more opportunities. Jack was resourceful in using local paid work to subsidise valuable yet unpaid journalism experience in London.

> It was really hard to get any opportunities back home, it's a cul-de-sac at the end of the motorway and everyone's just building ships … I work three days at the internship and then two days back home in a bar … so I can go to these distant places down south and live there for like a week and bankrupt myself and then come back and do it all again (Jack)

The additional costs of unpaid work in London (e.g. travel, accommodation and loss of income from missing paid work) would be prohibitive to many students, further entrenching inequalities of opportunity.

An aspiration to move in the short-term, for perceived better opportunities, but then to return "home" in the longer term was echoed by several participants:

> In my mind at the moment it's a temporary move in the sense that it's 5–7 years and then I feel I would have got the most I can out of everything London has to offer, and the idea may be to come back to the North and to kind of give back everything I've got (Augustus)

This loyalty was common amongst students who studied near home and they expressed a sense of belonging, family and community that was deeper than the economic drivers to permanently relocate.

Many had undertaken national or international unpaid work (including volunteering and placements), and described how geographical mobility was rewarding and even transformative:

> It definitely opened my mind to wanting to work internationally more, and I think the idea that you can do internships and stuff abroad, I think it did make my world bigger in the sense that travelling to certain places become more achievable (Ella)

Even when the initial motivation for mobility was to enhance their CV, participants often discovered intrinsic and personal value, reporting increased confidence and a new perspective on life/work.

Materiality (lived things)

Materialities such as technology, clothes and food frequently featured in narratives of unpaid work, yet money was the most prominent. Student poverty is perhaps not a primary societal concern given that associated with choice of being a student and temporary in nature. At a time of their lives when

many of the participants were short of cash and accruing student debts, it was interesting they were also prepared to work unpaid although a sense of dissonance was sometimes evident in their reflections:

> I got into quite a lot of debt, just overdraft debt, so it's not a big deal but it's not ideal (Harriet)

However, almost all the participants had to also undertake paid work to support themselves. Harriet also described how her ambitions to gain relevant experience and attain a first-class degree were hampered by the immediate necessity and stress of paying bills.

Money and material goods symbolise success and status in our society. Augustus expressed how this cultural context contributes to the phenomenon of unpaid work:

> People's self-worth comes from where they work and how much salary they get as a result. I suppose that unpaid internships do come out of that in a sense that people now feel that in order to get on that social ladder and to become more socially mobile they've got to endure, well, it is actual slavery, right? Because they are working for free, so they've got to endure that for the sake of the work experience (Augustus)

Augustus was the only participant to express unpaid work in such stark terms "actual slavery", most other participants were tolerant of it, e.g. Dominika commented:

> It's not like you get a load of work and they really exploit you, no, sometimes you can get really good experience, yet it is a shame that it's all unpaid (Dominika)

One participant had offered to work unpaid illustrating the attitude of some participants who were grateful for the valuable experience:

> I was looking for jobs but I didn't use the word "job" because I didn't want to seem like I was after something so I just used the word "opportunity" then the HR manager just got back to me … and she said you can do a month placement [unpaid] (Milly)

It was noteworthy that the word "opportunity" was often used to describe unpaid work.

Alongside his studies and volunteering, Zahir undertook an unpaid commercial internship in China. He felt he was fortunate for the opportunity to travel, gain experience and meet new friends from many countries.

> I was very, very lucky when I got there … had an absolutely amazing time, one of the best experiences of my entire life even though you're working for free (laughs) (Zahir)

Not only was he working for free, but he had also worked alongside his studies to save thousands of pounds to pay for the internship. He was subsequently offered two prestigious graduate roles, so his investment paid off.

Discussion

Using a phenomenological approach through Van Manen's existentials has allowed us to explore unpaid work as it is experienced by students and graduates within a social and political historical context as well as the personal meaning they attribute to it. Corporeality surfaces physical aspects that are navigated, e.g. mental health, age. Spatiality highlights the importance of space and location, including a yearning for home as well as a desire to experience new places. Relationality brings to the fore the role of varied relationships for career-building as well as life enhancement. And perhaps most interestingly temporality reminds us of how expectations of time especially for young people can be challenging. Materiality most closely resonates of dominant themes about the economic sacrifices and benefits associated with higher education. A focus on all of these provides a framework which can assist both research and practice to resist dominant discourses of employability which ignore the complexity of students and graduates.

The phenomenon of, and indeed the market for unpaid work is thriving in a neo-liberal society in which young people shoulder the responsibility for their own future success. The participants had

largely internalised the messages from family, education and wider society that standing out from the crowd, working hard and moulding themselves into desirable employee would lead to success and ergo happiness (Tholen, 2013; Tomlinson et al., 2017). Their experiences of unpaid work were motivated by their perceived need to compensate for their deficit in a competitive labour market. Many experienced vulnerabilities, powerlessness and sacrifice during, and because of, working unpaid and compromising their studies and opportunities for paid work in the hope that this would pay off later. Their belief in a meritocratic system may have been naïve and yet ironically, this helped them to improve their prospects. There was a sense that gaining experience no longer gave them a competitive edge but was a necessity just so they didn't get "left behind". However, many realised during work experience or upon graduating that there was another, unspoken dimension to their prospects – that the university they attended, who they knew, and their background were important too. A willingness to be mobile was perceived as a necessity, despite public policy which champions regional graduate opportunities and retaining local talent (e.g. Cunningham & Christie, 2019).

An important observation was how participants could be pulled and pushed between apparently binary positions. Participants tried to make sense of contradictions (Christie, 2019), for example, a belief in individual agency versus a sense of fatality (both powerlessness or luck); being anxious but also courageous; trying to stand out while also belonging; being mobile as well as rooted; being short of money and working unpaid, and feeling despair in the present, but remaining hopeful in the future. Harriet's quote in relation to debt and working unpaid evokes these tensions: "it's no big deal, but it's not ideal". Her words summarise well the dissonant meanings attached to many experiences of unpaid work and mobilities and the cognitive strategies which helped participants to make sense and cope with events. Learning how work works was a useful and yet often painful outcome of unpaid work experiences where expectations are not always explicitly explained.

The expansion and acceptance of unpaid work is a phenomenon borne out of combination of factors of political and economic context, internalisation of pressures to "be employable" and careers provision which is not always accessed by people who most need it. Using a phenomenological approach to this study illuminates the essence of the shared experience of unpaid work and the diverse ways it is reflected upon.

Phenomenology has the power to uncover concerns fundamental to our existence whatever the initial question or topic, such as anxiety, authenticity and life purpose (although Heidegger refuted the existentialist label that is often identified with his work by others, e.g. strive for authenticity, anxiety, life project). No matter what the topic being researched, there are existential issues and dilemmas (such as striving for authenticity and life purpose, anguish and care) underlying everyday experiences.

The richness of the findings supports scholarship which reveals diverse and unequal experiences (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2004) and that contextual factors are important (e.g. family, aspirations, culture, resources). Questioning what is "normal" and assuring students they are not alone is important, particularly in a neoliberal environment which can alienate them against their "competitors".

For practitioners interested in a social justice-informed approach to their work, how best to advise on unpaid internships epitomises the difficulty in enacting social justice in practice (Buzdugan, 2020). A commitment to social justice would surely lead practitioners to reject unpaid work as a good option to endorse for students. However, the role of the manager or vacancies co-ordinator in developing policy on this is different from that of an adviser working with individuals who may have found opportunities independently which may provide a route into competitive careers. Arguably, this creates "emotional dirty work" (e.g. McMurray & Ward, 2014) for practitioners who may be led by the priorities of the individual before them, rather than their sense of what is socially just. However, our findings also indicate that students themselves wrestle with these issues and are aware of the compromises of carving out careers in imperfect circumstances. Career conversations which are honest and contextualised can give space to reflect.

Given the collective nature of experiences and perceptions of unpaid work and the limited and optional nature of individual guidance, we believe that a group context is ideal for raising issues presented in this study. A practical change we have faced has been how to include theory and critical discussions of working rights and concepts such as career capitals and resilience in web resources, careers workshops and curriculum. We have created and delivered mandatory and accredited undergraduate "professional skills" curriculum units which include employability content such as CV writing and interview skills yet also introduce critical thinking around topics such as unpaid work and career planning (Smith, 2021). We have found it is easier to have tough conversations about inequalities within this context rather than on an individual basis. Striking the balance between optimism and realism is a challenge many career advisers will relate to (Scurry et al., 2020) and communicating bad news may not be popular with students. In individual interactions we are now more likely to instigate discussions about contextual factors and understand meaning.

Engaging with phenomenological enquiry can be enlightening and has indeed informed our practice. The manner of our engagement was not as objective, distanced researchers but caring, curious professionals immersed in the field. It provoked us to deeply consider our role in the phenomena of unpaid work and how we could best prepare and support students and graduates. Participant experiences highlighted that often we prepare them for work at a superficial level (e.g. the mechanics of getting their first job) but not about issues of underemployment, exploitation and the "psychological contract" of unspoken rules and expectations. Through reflexive practice, our research has fundamentally enhanced the way we work. There is an earnest strive for authenticity in phenomenology which may make it particularly meaningful to careers researchers.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated in this article how a phenomenological approach enables both as careers professionals, and the students and graduate participants in this research to reflect upon how experiences are contextualised within time, relationships, places and economic circumstances. It has shown how paying close attention to a social phenomenon such as unpaid work can acknowledge collective issues such as exploitation and powerlessness as well as the role of the community (parents, peers, educators, employers and mentors as well as career professionals) in supporting those in transition and helping them to question what is "normal" (Hooley et al., 2017).

Specifically, we have argued that Van Manen's (2014, 1990) "existentials" of lived experience (relationality, temporality, corporeality, spatiality and materiality) can serve as a theoretical lens and practical framework through which to uncover injustices. Exploring everyday experiences urge a foregrounding of both individual and shared struggles which can lead "clients" to recognise "career" is not just their problem/responsibility and direct energy towards collective responses. This holistic approach complements existing career theories, such as the signposts towards socially just career guidance and systems theory. It bridges the artificial chasm between structural and agentic, acknowledging the importance of the interplay and offering an opportunity to appreciate the supportive and restrictive influences of both.

The objective of phenomenology is not to "prove" findings which can be "generalised" or repeated but to raise questions, to challenge assumptions and to provoke thought. As Smythe (2011) explains, it is quite normal, at the end of a research project, to feel that there is much more to say, different ways to interpret data and perhaps more questions raised than answered. There is never a feeling of having completed the process and tied up loose ends neatly. It is our hope that sharing this study and our experiences of using a phenomenological approach will resonate, stirring curiosity and wonder amongst professionals seeking ways to understand careers in context.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data Access Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to [restrictions e.g. their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants].

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