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Young people and precarious work in England during the Covid-19 pandemic: a psychology of working perspective

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ABSTRACT

Young people are disproportionately represented in precarious work and are particularly vulnerable to labour market shocks. This article explores the lived experiences of twenty-one young precarious workers in England during the Covid-19 pandemic. Employing a qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) design, repeat interviews were conducted in 2021 to examine how participants' needs were met within the context of precarious work and how they made meaning of their working lives. Reflexive thematic analysis was guided by the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT), with a focus on human needs. Findings explore the role of career adaptability, work volition, social support, and critical consciousness as malleable factors that can buffer young people against the adverse effects of precarity. Participants articulated diverse rationalizations of their work situations: dedication to precarious career; adapting to stopgap option; juggling trade-offs between work factors; and resigned disengagement. While they utilized resourceful, lifewide strategies to meet their needs and demonstrated a clear awareness of labour market injustices, none engaged in collective or political action. The article concludes that while PWT concepts offer value in analysing precarity, the theory is less suited to illuminate the complex role of reflexivity in shaping worker subjectivities.

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Introduction

Young people are over-represented among precarious workers. They are vulnerable to long-lasting economic “scarring” if they do not find a secure pathway in the transition from education to the labour market (ILO, 2019). In the UK, they face multiple challenges including lower statutory minimum wage levels,¹ fewer structured routes into employment, higher housing costs, and greater debt for education participation (Murray & Webster, 2022). As new/er entrants to the labour market, young people can experience labour market marginalization with an associated risk of precarious work, especially during periods of economic shock (Furlong et al., 2017). Policymakers seek to address the risks of precarious work in their aspirations for Good Work (Eurofound, 2021; ILO, 2019). However, aspects of liberal market economies operate against such policy aspirations, including weak employment protections, normalization of atypical work patterns, growing in-work poverty, and involuntary economic inactivity (Jones & Kumar, 2022).

Increasing attention has been paid to precarious work by work psychologists. Researchers have argued for

a critical approach to the topic (Seubert et al., 2023) and warned against the risk of psychology remaining complicit with discourses that responsibilize individuals for their own precarity (Blustein et al., 2025; Coultas et al., 2023; McWha-Hermann et al., 2024). Notable research includes Blustein's (2019) study of the erosion of decent work for older workers in the USA, in which he highlights the negative impact of work that is precarious or lacks dignity. His approach drew upon concepts from Psychology of Working Framework (PWF) and Psychology of Working Theory (PWT), both of which he was a founding author for, with PWT building upon PWF. Notably, PWT has assembled a range of valuable concepts, that Blustein et al. (2023) argue can assist in exploring both decent and precarious working lives. Inspired by this relatively new body of work, it is concepts from PWT that have influenced the research reported upon in this article. Within PWT, marginalization is considered a predictor of the likelihood of an individual securing decent work. It is defined as “the relegation of people (or groups of people) to a less powerful or included position within a society” (Duffy et al., 2016, p. 132). Our focus on young people as

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a discrete marginalized group addresses a gap in the PWT literature, which has tended to prioritize other characteristics such as class, gender and race.

Central to PWT (Blustein, 2013; Duffy et al., 2016, 2019) are three “human needs” which good quality work can help to fulfill: firstly, the need for survival and power – associated with work providing the means to survive and the adaptive capacity to control resources; secondly, the need for social connection and contribution – work is a major context to develop and sustain relationships and connect to wider society; thirdly, the need for self-determination – scope for deep engagement in work, yielding a sense of autonomy and competence. The concept of needs from the theory led us to our first research question:

1) To what extent are young people’s needs met in the context of precarious work?

Furthermore, despite a growing interest (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019; Trappmann et al., 2023) in how young people make meaning of precarious work, relevant empirical psychological research about young people is rare (Kesisoglou et al., 2016). There is considerable interest across the social sciences in precarity. Standing (2014) made a landmark contribution in this field through his characterization of the “precariat” as a social class. However, others (Alberti et al., 2018) have argued against his presentation of the precariat as a class, due to the flow of workers into and out of precarious employment, and propose that attention needs to be paid to the complexities of both objective and subjective processes of precaritisation. The study’s interest in this led us to our second research question:

2) How do young people make meaning of precarious work?

Qualitative research is suitable for an exploration of worker subjectivities, and was chosen as an appropriate approach to answer these research questions. In particular, a qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) design (Neale, 2018) offers value in exploring how people’s circumstances – and the subjective meanings attributed to them – evolve over time. A longitudinal perspective is relevant as it allows for an illumination of the temporal dynamics that can shape workers’ lives and perspectives as they move into, through and out of precarious work. It is of particular relevance to this study as precarious work is not stable over time and is vulnerable to economic turbulence. The Covid-19 pandemic represents a dramatic example of such an economic shock and its impact. A QLR approach was therefore appropriate to understanding how precarious workers’ meaning making evolves over time in a difficult labour market.

Data were generated from repeated semi-structured interviews (forty in total between March-September

2021) with a purposefully diverse group of young precarious workers. From the outset values associated with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2024) influenced research design and aligned well with the study’s social constructivist philosophy (Patton, 2019). Using a QLR approach, our study contributes to the limited body of qualitative psychological research about how young people navigated the unprecedented shock to working lives caused by the Covid pandemic (Akkermans et al., 2020).

In addressing our research questions, the broad aim of our research is to explore how young people experience and navigate precarious work applying a PWT lens. Empirically, the study contributes insights about the diverse responses and rationalizations that participants employ. Theoretically, our study highlights the importance of reflexivity, defined as “the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa” (Archer, 2007), and supports an argument that reflexivity is something that PWT concepts do not adequately address.

Precarious work, young people and the Psychology of Working

Alongside literature about young people and precarious work, in this section we go on to further outline concepts from PWT that have guided the research design. PWT authors (Blustein, 2013; Duffy et al., 2016, 2019) have assembled and built upon existing theories from across the social sciences, not just psychology. Although sharing common origins, a distinction can be made between PWT, a causal model of constructs with an associated validated scale, and PWF, which is a broad framework of principles, upon which PWT was built. Both are associated with a coalition of scholars with shared concerns for social justice in work and career (e.g., McWhirter & McWha-Hermann, 2021). PWT makes theoretical propositions in identifying what factors contribute to decent work outcomes (Duffy et al., 2016, 2019). In its construction, it identifies four predictors of decent work (economic constraints; work volition; marginalization; career adaptability). Moderators to these predictors are economic conditions, proactive personality, critical consciousness, and social support. It understands the outcomes of decent work in terms of the fulfilment of economic and psychological needs, leading to work fulfilment and well-being. Importantly, in this article, PWT concepts were utilized more expansively to assist and organize data analysis and interpretation as appropriate to a social constructivist research design.

“Economic conditions” is proposed as a concept that influences possibilities of securing decent work in PWT. The shock to the economy of the Covid-19 pandemic led to a shrinkage of the youth labour market, largely because young people were more likely to work in sectors that were hard-hit by “lockdowns”² (e.g., hospitality, retail, and arts). In the UK between February 2020 and August 2021, Williams et al. (2021) report that young people (age 16–24 years) accounted for nearly half (46%) of the total fall in employment, with a total of 425,000 jobs lost. In a dramatic turnaround to these trends, the demand for graduate labour (component of the youth labour market) showed a rapid increase as the economy re-opened later in 2021 (AGCAS & Prospects, 2022). In his research about the impact of Covid-19 on recent graduates in the UK, Tomlinson (2023) concludes that such periods of shock and recession can have adverse impacts on a whole generation. As new/entrants to the labour market, there can be disruption of transitions across wider “youth” and more qualified “graduate” populations. Similarly, the student part-time job market collapsed during the pandemic bringing hardship to many reliant on income to top-up loans (Prospects, 2020).

PWT proposes the concept of economic constraints as an important factor in influencing work outcomes; it reflects socio-economic status/class. Youth transitions literature has a long tradition of exploring the various ways precarious work is experienced due to class (Furlong et al., 2017). Young precarious workers are not a homogeneous group; and much depend on the wider context of the worker’s life and their prospects. During the economic conditions of the pandemic, Cook et al. (2021) show how the consequences of precarious work are influenced by pre-existing inequality and marginality; for some young people it was an inconvenience whereas for others it led to severe hardship. Reflecting on such potential commonality and diversity of experience, this study explores a variety of young precarious workers.

PWT contributes to a long tradition of research in work psychology that explores the concept of human needs (e.g., Autin et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Seubert et al., 2021) and to what extent these are satisfied by work. Individuals can have different orientations towards precarious work and how it meets (or not) economic and psychological needs. In their work precarity framework, Allan et al. (2021) recognize the value of PWT to explore precarious work, despite it being centred on decent work. They distinguish their framework from PWT in its inclusion of work precarity as the mediator between quality of work and various outcomes rather than the need satisfaction proposed by PWT. However, they go

onto to acknowledge that a better understanding is required about the connections between precarious work, work precarity, decent work, need satisfaction and self-determination. Notably, in their typology, just one category “precarity from work” (p. 9) highlights lack of need satisfaction. Relatedly, Allan and Blustein (2022) have illustrated the importance of dignity at work and how this may endure and insulate needs despite work precarity. Responding to this enduring interest in needs, our research prioritizes an exploration of worker subjectivities and the extent to which needs are met or not in the context of precarious work (RQ1).

In addition, of importance to the analyses in this study are some concepts from PWT (i.e., career adaptability, work volition, critical consciousness and social support) that its authors claim are malleable, contribute to positive career outcomes and can be influenced by psychoeducational interventions. Work volition originates from Duffy et al. (2012) research and represents an individual’s perception of choice in career decision-making despite constraints. It builds on well-established concepts such as work locus of control. Career adaptability derives from Savickas and Porfeli’s (2012) research about individual resources and readiness. Concern, control, curiosity, and confidence regarding one’s career are proposed to promote positive attitudes and are associated with hope and optimism. Critical consciousness draws on authors from education such as Freire (1996), arguing that it can limit the negative effects of marginalization. It is proposed to comprise critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action. Finally, social support finds origins in social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994) and it is proposed to provide buffering for individuals and can be accessed from within and without the work place.

Two common themes (Irvine & Rose, 2024) relating to the impact of precarious work that can influence career adaptability and work volition are mental health and temporal uncertainty. For example, an ability to look positively to the future is associated with career adaptability. However, temporal uncertainty associated with precarious work can lead young people to feel stuck in a “continuous present” (Bone, 2019), and be constrained in their ability to plan for the future (Cuervo & Chesters, 2019). Precarious work has also been shown to affect wider lives and leisure due to fragmented and limited time availabilities (Batchelor et al., 2020). Mental health has been shown to influence work volition (Bouchard & Nauta, 2018) and there also is good evidence that precarious employment is associated with negative mental health outcomes (e.g., Rönnblad et al., 2019). In research during the pandemic, Burgess et al. (2022) illustrate the disproportionate adverse impact on mental health

experienced by young people from racially minoritised backgrounds. PWT does not foreground mental health and temporal uncertainty, however, they are recognized in related work on precarity by Blustein et al. (2025), in which they describe how individuals' ability to navigate such factors is associated with reflexive responses, summarized as adaptation, resistance and resignation.

Both career adaptability and social support from PWT align to the resources that individuals have both personally and socially and contribute to their ability to navigate precarious work and satisfy needs. Youth-transitions and employability research (Furlong et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2023) has consistently illustrated how such important resources are unevenly held and often influenced by socio-economic background or what PWT refers to as "economic constraints".

Regarding making meaning (RQ2), and of relevance to both work volition and critical consciousness in PWT, several authors problematize neoliberal discourses that influence how young people reflect upon their circumstances. Kesisoglou et al. (2016) apply a psychodiscursive approach to demonstrate how precarity is normalized and how young people position themselves as "effortful subjects". Ambivalence associated with meritocratic, aspirational discourses is also evoked by Flanagan's (2008) depiction of "public hopes and private anxieties" and Berlant's (2011) concept of "cruel optimism". Rydzik and Kissoon's (2022) study of student-workers in the hospitality sector suggests that poor quality work socializes young people to internalize norms such as subservience, emotion suppression and even sexual harassment. The normalization of exploitative internships for students that are presented as valuable for experience-building, also socializes acceptance of poor work conditions (Cunningham et al., 2024).

Other research of relevance to making meaning has sought to illuminate the active and passive processes precarious workers use to rationalize their circumstances. For example, Mrozowicki and Trappmann (2020) identify four types of young precarious workers: (i) those whose goal/benchmark comparison is full-time employment; (ii) "post-workerist" creatives; (iii) those whose attempts to escape precarity are blocked; and (iv) those who have withdrawn from traditional employment relationships. Similarly, Selenko et al. (2018) highlight identity issues in "atypical" work. They distinguish between identity and identification, the latter addresses processes of change in identity. Processes described are passive incremental (unconscious and automatic); active incremental (conscious, intentionality, reframing of strategies); transformative (conscious, triggered by a major event, change). Interestingly, neither of these articles foregrounds the concept of reflexivity, although what

they describe shares much in common with influential research on this topic (Archer, 2012). The shock of pandemic disruption was a major event with scope to trigger heightened self-reflection and reflexivity. Notably, work volition and critical consciousness from PWT complement issues of identity, reflexivity, and neoliberal discourses although PWT research does not prioritize these in the depth given to them by other authors (Archer, 2012; Kesisoglou et al., 2016; Selenko et al., 2018).

Methodology

Research context

The research took place in 2021 involving workers in an urban location in England identified here as "Northcity". The choice of one city region location capitalized on researcher contacts and is inspired by place-based sociological work (Back & Sinha, 2018). The research was conceived prior to the pandemic, but pivoted to a consideration of how precarity was amplified by that shock, exploring research questions about worker subjectivities regarding economic and psychological needs as well as meaning-making in the context of precarious work during a unique period of social and economic disruption. An advisory group of academics, an employer, and a trade union representative were consulted on the project design, methods and findings. At the end of the live project, six participants volunteered as a youth advisory group to comment on public policy recommendations.

Researchers' perspectives

The first author conceived of the research project and secured funding for it. As an interdisciplinary education and employment researcher, she brought complementary personal, professional and scholarly perspectives to it. She is a parent and a careers professional who worked with young people for many years, and a researcher who has undertaken related qualitative studies. Identifying as both a pracademic and critical career studies scholar, she was keen to bridge a divide between criticality and pragmatism in the project. The second author acted as a mentor and critical friend for the duration of the research. The third author was a young person, former schoolteacher and PhD researcher in Secondary Education and contributed valuable empirical insights, undertaking the research on a part-time basis for the live project duration. In regular meetings about the research especially during data generation, the contrasting ages and experiences, as well as theoretical knowledge of the two fieldwork researchers was valuable in bringing

different perspectives on the study. During data generation and in subsequent analyses, the researchers were aware of their own responses to the young people. Examples included concern at the insecurity that was endured, admiration of positivity against the odds and observations of both naivety and cynicism that did not serve some participants well. In later stages of analysis, the first author, grappled with a growing realization of the limitations of the PWT concepts and experienced self-doubt in how to critique the theory, drawing upon research from outside of work psychology.

Participant recruitment

Approval from the University's Ethics Committee required robust procedures for consent and protection of participants, as well as employment of a university-authorized professional transcription company that ensured data protection. Subsequent to approval, an open call for participants was shared widely by researchers, colleagues and contacts via email and social media as well as in-person creating a convenience sample (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). Specific industries reliant on precarious workers were mentioned in participant recruitment materials, i.e., retail, hospitality, and the arts. Interested participants were directed to a webpage for further information and an online form to indicate an expression of interest and to allow for eligibility checks. Pandemic restrictions to in-person interactions meant virtual methods of recruitment were used and it was harder to reach those who were not digitally connected. The main selection criteria for inclusion at project outset were: age 18–30 years; identifying as having a current/recent precarious work status (defined below); living and working in Northcity.

Participant information

Using Furlong et al. (2017) work status categories, at the first wave of the project, participants were either in a marginal work zone (unemployed, government schemes, student work) or liminal work zone (employment that is not full-time and lacks an open-ended contract). One exception was a participant who had full-time, low-paid, permanent employment but was furloughed.³ Twenty-one eligible volunteers participated in the first wave of interviews. Nineteen went on to participate in the second wave interview. Participants were offered a £20 voucher incentive to take part in each interview. Using pseudonyms, Table 1 includes brief details of participant demographics and circumstances at both interview points. Most participants had a good level of education. Eight were university graduates, nine

were working students and four had completed secondary/further education. Using UK defined NS-SEC (ONS, 2023) categories of family occupational backgrounds, ten were from managerial/professional backgrounds, six intermediate, three routine and manual, and one had a disabled parent who could not work. The growth of precarity means it impacts even those from relatively privileged backgrounds; our participant group reflects this.

Data generation

Fieldwork occurred in two waves; interviews were conducted by the first and third authors. The first interviews occurred at the height of a national lockdown (T1: March 2021), whereas at the second wave (T2: September 2021), the economy was opening, as restrictions eased. Most interviews were conducted online, although in the second wave, two participants opted for an in-person interview. Interview duration was typically about an hour, and they were recorded and transcribed. Questions in both waves were informed by a biographical approach (Merrill & West, 2009) and also explored human needs, inspired by Blustein's (2019) qualitative research methodology. In wave one initial questions addressed previous/current work circumstances and hopes for the future. Additional questions explored relationships and social connections in relation to work. Several questions explored wider social issues, including definitions of decent work, the role of public services, e.g., careers advice in education, and public employment services and the role of collective action (e.g., via trade unions). In the second wave, interviews addressed how participants' circumstances had changed since the first interview and explored topics and themes constructed from wave one.

Analytic approach

Interview data was analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis aligns with a social constructivist epistemology and an abductive approach, allowing for, at different stages, both the generation of themes inductively as well as a more deductive orientation using PWT (Blustein, 2019; Duffy et al., 2016). After each interview wave, the field work researchers listened to recordings, read, re-read, added comments to and coded transcripts independently before meeting together to discuss topics of interest. Initial coding of first interviews was organic and open, involving a process of noticing potentially relevant meaning in the data, and tagging it with a code. The grouping of a long list of codes

Table 1. Participant characteristics/circumstances.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Initial education/ accommodation status	Employment status at interview 1 – March 2021	Employment status at interview 2 – September 2021
Amy	F	22	White British	Music Graduate. Living independently.	Unemployed/claiming Universal Credit.	Marketing Kickstart placement (government-sponsored work experience).
Alexa	F	30	White British	Nursing Graduate. Living independently.	Agency administrative work.	Contract extended to fixed term.
Rosalind	F	22	White British	Chemistry Graduate. Living with family.	Agency scientific work.	Temporary role has become permanent.
Lauren	F	21	White British	Psychology Graduate. Living with family.	Furloughed from pub/restaurant. Started job as temporary college receptionist.	Left pub job. Working full-time (permanent) at college.
Simone	F	24	Mixed/ Multiple	Music Graduate. Living independently.	Claiming Universal Credit. Working at two restaurants. Doing charity facilitation projects.	Left both hospitality jobs. Performing music full-time (self-employed).
Blake	M	24	White British	Visual Arts Graduate. Living with family.	Claiming Universal Credit. Self-employed artist, working from home. Completed University-sponsored Enterprise course.	Freelance part-time studio assistant job (London). Own self-employed creative practice.
Tom	M	24	White British	Environment Studies Graduate. Living with family.	Claiming Universal Credit. Working part- time as a support/care worker.	Environmental consultancy internship recently led to graduate position.
Charlotte	F	24	White British	Social Sciences Graduate. Living independently.	Part-time Teaching Assistant in School. Furloughed from pub job.	Doing MA course (London). Freelance events work and part-time bar supervisor.
Jessica	F	20	Asian/ Asian British	Management Student. Student accommodation.	Furloughed from part-time retail job.	About to start industrial placement year (London).
Bea	F	20	White British	Management Student. Student accommodation	Occasional hospitality work (not furloughed due to casual status).	About to start industrial placement. Part- time work in restaurant.
Matty	M	24	White British	Postgraduate Management Student. Student accommodation	Furloughed from main hotel role, doing maintenance work part time.	Completed MA. Working 50-hour weeks in hotel and has been promoted.
Henna	F	23	Asian/ Asian British	Postgraduate Psychology Student. Living with family.	Part-time work in supermarket.	Completed MSc. Part-time agency special needs teaching assistant and supermarket work. About to start distance learning doctorate.
Adam	M	21	White British	Economics Student. Student accommodation.	Cycle delivery part-time. Furloughed from leisure centre job.	Part-time job in restaurant. Due to start unpaid internship.
Nina	F	20	Mixed/ Multiple	Social Science Student. Student accommodation.	Furloughed from pub job. Planning Study Year Abroad and applying for placements.	In South America for Study Abroad.
Bethan	F	20	White British	Business Student. Student accommodation.	Working in a “dark kitchen” doing food preparation.	Just started an industrial placement. Mainly working at home.
Duncan	M	22	White British	Hospitality Student. Student accommodation.	Furloughed from hotel job. Recently got part-time hospitality job.	
Alice	F	19	White British	Management Student. Student accommodation.	Unable to find part-time work to do alongside studies.	
Cherelle	F	26	Mixed/ Multiple	Completed further education. Living independently.	Unemployed/claiming Universal Credit.	Part-time work in hospitality. Still getting some Universal Credit.
Chelsie	F	26	White British	Completed further education. Living independently.	Furloughed from retail supervisor job.	Back at work full-time for same company but considering leaving.
Clara	F	21	White British	Completed further education. Living independently.	Training as hairdresser and working part- time in take-away.	Two part-time jobs – hair salon and take- away.
Khaleel	M	29	Asian/ Asian British	Completed secondary education. Living independently.	Unemployed photographer on Universal Credit. Doing own creative work.	New Enterprise Allowance scheme (government-sponsored); setting up own business.

into topics after wave one was influenced by wider research questions and the interview questions, whilst allowing unexpected themes to be constructed. After wave two, topics and themes from wave one were re-evaluated and were distilled around how participants made sense of their situation as well as what resources supported them. Transcripts were subsequently uploaded into NVivo 12, which enabled a systematic organization of themes by the first author. Both cross-sectional analysis across the data was possible as well as exploring individual cases over both waves. Inductive themes were constructed around individual resources/responses, organizational enablers/barriers and societal trends. They were grouped around the consequences of precarious work (economic, temporal, career identity, mental health), possibilities for change over time (individual resources and responses, social support, economic conditions), and individual resistance and sense-making (decision-making, improvisation, criticality, cultural narratives such as stopgap or rite of passage). Many of the inductive themes provided the basis for and were carried forward into the subsequent deductive analysis, where it was possible to scrutinize those themes using PWT concepts.

A later stage of analysis conducted by the first author was deductive, and focussed on refined research questions that prioritized individual responses rather than wider social issues, and drew upon concepts from PWT alongside relevant sociological conceptions. As appropriate to a social constructivist research design, such concepts were used to organize data interpretation and develop inductive themes. Many of the inductive themes endure into our findings, however, the use of PWT allowed for a refinement and grouping of themes for greater clarity. The original design of methods (i.e., interview questions which aligned to the PWT concept of needs) was helpful in returning to the data. PWT concepts were used to illuminate analysis, but this was done critically, with attention to the limitations of the theory. The PWT concepts of career adaptability, work volition, social support and critical consciousness were chosen as helpful organizing constructs to explore needs' satisfaction. Consideration was also given to what subcomponents of PWT concepts were most important and what aspects of the inductive themes were not explained fully by PWT concepts. For example, what we observed of participant criticality and use of cultural narratives in inductive analysis, led us to evaluate the

limitations of PWT concepts of work volition and critical consciousness.

Findings

The following sections present two broad thematic areas "career adaptability in uncertain times" and "work volition and crafting a career identity"; within each section sub-themes contribute to answering research questions (see Figure 1 for summary). In the first section, the PWT concept of career adaptability is used alongside social support to consider individual and social resources. In the second section the PWT concept of work volition, together with critical consciousness, is utilized to explore individual meaning-making, and leads us to suggest that these PWT concepts fall short in exploring complex worker subjectivities. Data illustrate that participants show both remarkable improvisation but that individual resources are also adversely affected by precarious work. Table 2 provides supplementary data.

Career adaptability in uncertain times

Career adaptability within PWT (Duffy et al., 2016), is considered important in securing decent work. In this section, we observe how subcomponents of career adaptability (notably "concern", "control" and "curiosity") were revealed in their presence or absence in participant responses. Themes were constructed around: "concern" relating to orientations to the future; "control" in abilities to remain upbeat and make autonomous decisions; and "curiosity" regarding capacities to find opportunities to grow. Lifewide individual and social resources drawn upon by participants were important in contributing to career adaptability and to the potential of satisfying needs despite precarious work (RQ1). Responses also suggest how for some the experience of precarity eroded career adaptability.

Concern and navigating unpredictable timescapes

The sense of a continuous present (Bone, 2019) and an inability to plan for the future (Cuervo & Chesters, 2019) was felt acutely. Future orientation is associated with "concern" in career adaptability and was adversely affected during the pandemic which caused the disruption, delay and cancellation of regular work opportunities. For some, temporal uncertainty limited their ability to be active citizens, via community participation or leisure, and it also constrained career planning (Cuervo & Chesters, 2019). A QLR approach allowed the research to explore how participants' circumstances and attitudes to past, present and future changed over time.

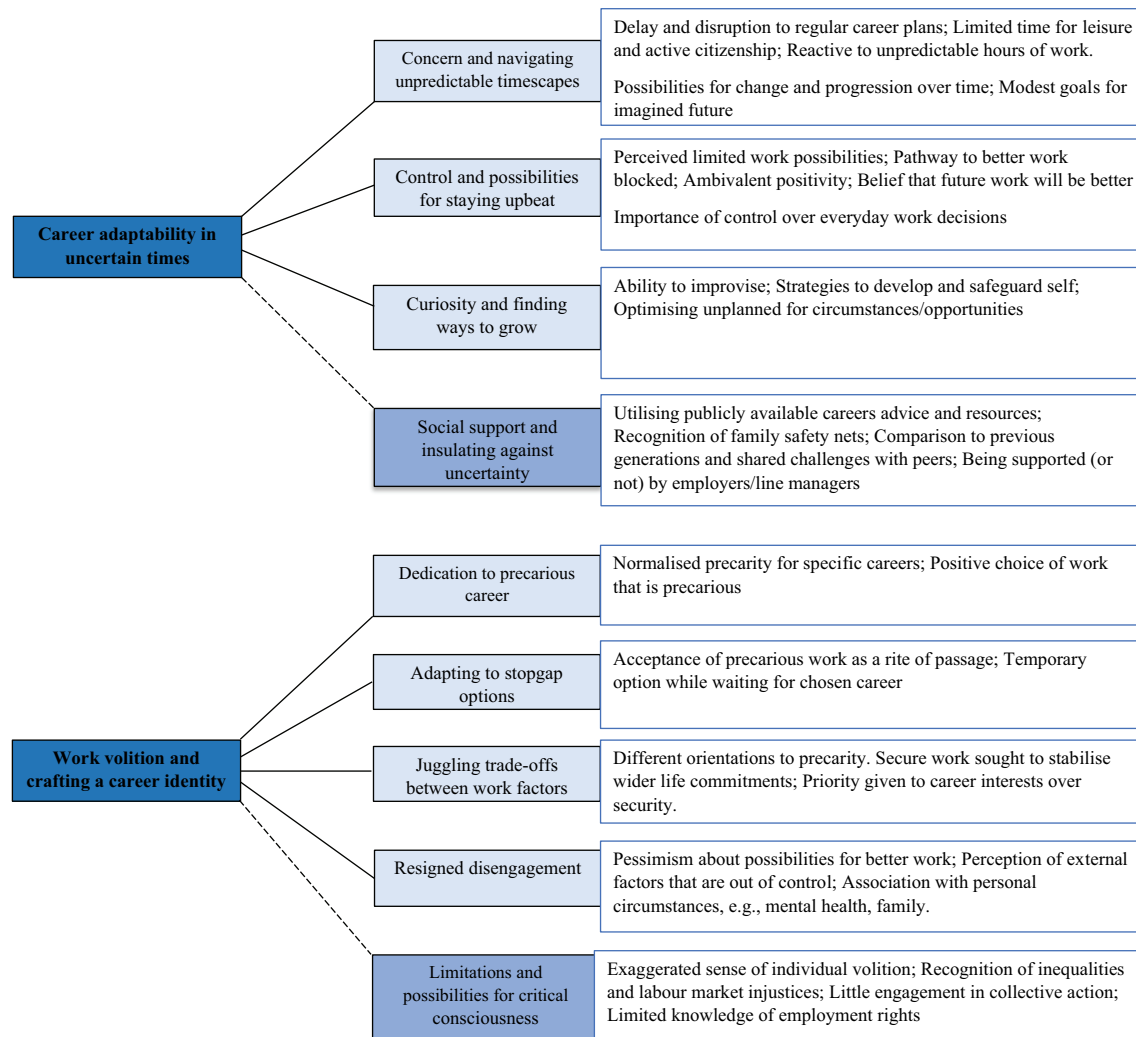


Figure 1. Summary of themes – diverse experiences and reflexive responses to precarious work.

Note: Themes from inductive analyses are presented in white boxes. Deductive analysis contributed to organisation and development of themes using an expansive approach to using PWT concepts which led to two broad themes ‘career adaptability in uncertain times’ and ‘work volition and crafting a career identity’. Dashed lines are used for social support and critical consciousness as these are distinct concepts in PWT, but our analyses suggest they feed into the two broad themes.

By the second interview, some participants were dealing with having too much work with anti-social hours (e.g., hospitality). In other fields, such as creative industries and event management, a re-emergence of pent-up work opportunities presented new challenges. Fears of income insecurity if work was disrupted again led to reluctance to decline work opportunities. The six-month period between the two interviews witnessed possibilities for change and progression (see Table 1), however, during second interviews with improved circumstances, many participants still expressed modest goals for the future. Lauren, a recent psychology graduate, had progressed from holding two roles (furloughed pub job and temporary receptionist) to a permanent administrator role, but she was nervous and uncertain:

It scares me looking too far into the future ... everything that happened, like graduating during the pandemic, I do think it has affected me a lot ... Lauren. (T2)

Similarly, despite his greater optimism about work in the second interview due to the support of a specialist Enterprise Programme, a self-employed photographer recognized the unpredictability of his work pipeline.

In terms of planning and ... safety for the ... future, I'd say in March I was at like 20% whereas now [September] I'm a bit more like 37%... Khaleel. (T2)

Control and possibilities for staying upbeat

Remaining upbeat is associated with “control” in career adaptability and participants varied in relation to this. Those who were students rationalized precarious

working circumstances as temporary, imagining future graduate employment as both decent and meaningful. For them, there was a sense that enduring poor work conditions was akin to a rite of passage and separated from the future. Nina, a furloughed student hospitality worker, who by wave two is overseas (Study Abroad year) was markedly more upbeat than at her first interview when her job had stopped and the possibility of studying abroad was in doubt.

I've got like quite a lot of control for myself because ... I know the road I want to go down ... I don't think the pandemic has impacted me too much in terms of future job prospects, it's more of like opportunities now ... Nina. (T2)

Not all participants were so positive about their scope to have control. Especially at wave one, several graduates, who were obliged to move into "any job" during the pandemic, were frustrated with lack of success in applying for more suitable graduate level occupations, describing how demoralizing it was to make repeated applications and hear nothing.

In the words of others, there were hints of publicly expressed hopes and private anxieties (Flanagan, 2008), reflecting a lack of control. An ambivalence appeared in the words of some participants, resonant of Kesisoglou et al. (2016) "effortful subjects". Alice's positive language, contrasted with her depiction of care work as physically and emotionally overwhelming.

But [the carer role] was ... an amazing job. You don't realise how hard it is ... Sometimes I was so exhausted I was literally crying in the break cos my feet just hurt so bad ... when you go back home you realise that it's just all so worth it. Alice (T1)

Similarly, Blake's words of positivity about working hard and being adaptable hinted of an ambivalent anxiety about his situation, despite having finally started a delayed freelance studio assistant role in wave two.

I'm working hard at this moment ... Things could change, and you must adapt... careers are not set in stone ... You could do one thing this year and then in a couple of years do something different. That'd be fine. Blake. (T2)

Having a sense of control over decision making is also associated with career adaptability. Experiences varied in relation to control over routine daily decision-making. Participants valued being able to manage their own time with flexibility. For example, Amy appreciated her employer's willingness to allow her to take time off at short notice due to unexpected personal issues. In contrast, Tom described the challenges of his zero hours support worker job, where he was depended upon but

had little control over when he had time off. His frustration with this was made worse as he compared what he was doing with what he had planned to do. His overseas volunteering placement had been cancelled due to the pandemic forcing him to take "any job".

... some of the hours I would have to work just cos of them depending on me ... You know it's not like ... 9 to 5 or whatever ... I couldn't take holiday easily. They didn't let me take any time off because they had no-one else ... Tom. (T2)

Curiosity and finding ways to grow

An ability to seek opportunities to grow is associated with "curiosity" in career adaptability. Some participants showed remarkable ability to improvise, looking for opportunities to grow personally, despite the damaging material consequences of precarity. Creative workers commented on benefits to creative outputs due to having more open-ended time to work; all were self-employed and despite recognizing inherent precarity, also idealized what this meant for their personal freedom. Furloughed students had more time to study and started work-related hobbies; graduates took previously unlikely key worker jobs. For some participants, there was a marked expression of optimism that things would get better, even if their current situation was not satisfactory. Several participants referred to finding their own ways to manage the stresses through exercise, getting out in nature, or practising meditation.

Social support and insulating against uncertainty

PWT includes "social support" as concept and our analyses illustrated how it can contribute to psychological resources such as career adaptability. Social support from public services influenced components of participants' career adaptability and could act as a buffer to risk of its erosion, although there were counter-examples of perceived poor quality advice (e.g., Cherelle). The importance of perceived genuineness of varied people in positions of support/power was clear. Participants felt that they knew when relevant staff providing support were genuinely interested in helping, and the dignity conveyed to recipients of support mattered. At wave two, Khaleel was more positive and glowing in his praise of his business adviser, who was "as sharp as a tack" and supported him via the New Enterprise Allowance scheme. Similarly, at wave two, Amy appreciated her manager's empathetic communication, which could reduce the stress of unpredictable changes in work patterns. She was thankful for having been directed to a KickStart work placement by Job Centre Plus staff, providing work experience after she had been unemployed for six months. In wave one, visual arts graduate,

Blake, reported on getting university support through start-up funding/training as a new artist. This was a lifeline for him in weathering the pandemic financially and professionally.

Social support from family was very important. A loss of secure income obliged some to adjust living circumstances and (if possible) return to a family home to reduce living costs (five remained or returned to a family home). Participants commented on both the barriers and advantages they faced in comparison to previous generations in their own families (e.g., Murray & Webster, 2022). Those who appeared most vulnerable to the negative consequences of precarious work were those without a family safety net. The extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic increased awareness of the importance of close family and community ties.

Work volition and crafting a career identity

Work volition within PWT (Duffy et al., 2016) reflects an individual's perception of choice in career decision-making despite external constraints. The process of crafting a career identity is important for work volition; strength of identity contributes to decision-making. It is also important when considering making meaning in relation to precarious work (RQ2). Precarious work may hinder the development of a work identity (Selenko et al., 2018). In this data, the impact of precarity on identity was contingent on the industry, and re-examination forced by the pandemic. In a disrupted context, participant responses revealed varied levels of confidence in pursuing or maintaining a chosen career path. For many, precarious work experiences during a period of wider shock generated a reflexivity about what they wanted in ways they may have previously taken for granted. Our analyses observe this going beyond a simple measure of work volition and different rationalizations were constructed to explain this: dedication to precarious career; adapting to stopgap option; juggling trade-offs between work factors; and resigned disengagement. The ability to retain a sense of career identity was important in contributing to satisfying needs despite precarious work. Critical reflection (associated with the PWT concept of critical consciousness) and belonging to a wider community were important in insulating vulnerable career identities and decision-making.

Dedication to precarious career

All participants worked in industries that were hit hard by lockdowns, and although some hospitality workers might rationalize the pause as temporary and even welcome furlough payments, for others, notably creative industry workers, the total pause to live events, led to

soul-searching about their work identity, challenging their deep identification with their field. Creative workers commented on how the stopping of live arts events had highlighted the importance of these industries going far beyond their financial contribution to livelihoods and venues; they lamented the normalized insecurity integral to pathways into the cultural industries. The phrase "not a proper job" was repeated by all creative workers (Simone, Blake, Khaleel), as a perception that others held about them. All had improved circumstances at wave two but recognized a sense of a normalized precarity. At wave two, Simone, a musician is happy to be performing again but reflects back on her experience:

... your persona and your self is so tied into your creations that ... basically if you're told ... "you can't do that anymore" ... it's a very vulnerable place that you make art from so I think it's difficult ... Simone. (T2)

Juggling trade-offs between work factors

The complex processes of decision-making were clear as participants were forced to evaluate previous career decisions and trade-offs between work factors such as security, enjoyment, and wellbeing. Prior to the pandemic, Charlotte had chosen freelance events work, but the pandemic forced her to take a temporary, part-time role as a school teaching assistant at wave one. However, by her second interview she had returned to freelance events work. Charlotte's rejection of more secure pathways contrasted with the frustration that new Chemistry graduate Rosalind experienced (at wave one) after six months on a rolling contract. Pragmatically, she wanted greater security as this was essential to access a housing tenancy and was something she thought should be possible in her chosen field.

It's difficult ... they said initially it was going to be a month ... ever since then it's been ... at the end of every month they'll decide whether they're going to keep me on for another month. Rosalind. (T1)

Much to her relief, her role became permanent by wave two which assisted her housing situation.

Adapting to stopgap options

External factors meant forced or short-term/stop gap choices. This was commonplace for students and graduates taking temporary jobs. Graduate Tom took a social care job out of necessity which also prompted fears about the feasibility of original career aspirations.

I've been unable to find work in my environmental background because there's less jobs and then the jobs that are there have thousands of applicants ... Maybe that's impacted my future ... Tom (T1)

Fortunately, by wave two, Tom had secured an environmental role, having left the care job to do a career-relevant internship. He was overjoyed to have got this role, even laughing that he was pleased to have a job with a pension, something he would have dismissed as “boring” before.

Resigned disengagement

At both waves, disappointment with the constraints of her circumstances triggered Cherelle (a care leaver, with existing mental health issue) to disengage with work; for her, good work seemed a remote possibility. The PWT model does not explicitly include mental health as a barrier (Duffy et al., 2016), although it identifies well-being as an outcome of decent work, and it is discussed in the wider PWF/PWT literature (Blustein et al., 2023). It is an important issue in affecting volition. Of all participants she was the most vocal about problems with work and seemed lost as to a route to the financial security she craved. For her, precarious work was hazardous, with little hope of escape. Resembling those who are “blocked” or withdrawn’ (Mrozowicki & Trappmann, 2020) from possibilities of decent work, she adopted an anti-work narrative:

I am anti-work; I really mean it. Because I have not felt any kind of positive mental or emotional developments or physically ... working doesn't enable me to feed myself properly ... when I do have time off, I am exhausted ... I would like to never work again. Cherelle. (T2)

Across the participant group, there was considerable candour about mental health and wellbeing issues, and how precarious work impacted this. Of twenty-one participants, four reported an existing mental health issue at the beginning of the project, and one indicated that the pandemic contributed to the diagnosis of a condition. Many found ways to limit the impact of such challenges, but Cherelle stood out as the most pessimistic.

Limitations and possibilities for critical consciousness

There was a tension between positive expressions of volition alongside limitations to “critical consciousness”. The words of some participants reflected a neoliberal social imaginary (Kesisoglou et al., 2016) in overstating individual power to cope with precarious work circumstances. Whilst recognizing the challenges of the external labour market especially during the pandemic and his own privileges, Adam, a student, is critical of others who make excuses not to find work.

I've weathered the storm quite well... I've had so many jobs and I always manage to find something new ...

I struggle to understand ... people that say there's nothing out there. Adam. (T2)

However, there were numerous examples of participants demonstrating a critical consciousness that was more sympathetic to others as they discussed systemic/organizational issues, and clearly recognized labour market injustices. Bad employer practice examples reported on prior to the pandemic included: unreliable working hours framed as a benign “family culture”; excessively delayed payments for freelance work; agency work with no sick pay, compassionate leave, or benefits. In contrast several participants recognized good employer practices, e.g., Chelsie (who had her own mental health issue) reported positively of her retail employer's mental health first aider training. When asked about how they defined decent work, participants were able to contrast precarious work with what they wanted for future careers, but had limited knowledge of employment rights. Despite an ability to articulate what was wrong with contemporary work, and expression of sympathy for trade unions as a collective way to resist poor quality employment, none of the participants were union members. Financial costs were often cited as the reason for not joining. Most participants did not work in strongly unionized contexts. The pandemic triggered a reflexivity about how work connected them to a wider community even if this was not structured into organized collective activity. This served to contribute to a sense of pride that helped insulate potentially vulnerable career identities. All participants, some of whom worked in key worker jobs, commented with conviction on how society should value precarious key workers in society, not just in a time of crisis.

Discussion and conclusions

Malleable psychological concepts that PWT (Duffy et al., 2016) proposes (work volition, career adaptability, social support and critical consciousness) have been used to explore to what extent young people's needs are met in the context of precarious work. In so doing, we have shown how PWT concepts align with other literature, for example, relating to the role of temporal uncertainty (Bone, 2019; Cuervo & Chesters, 2019) and career identity (Selenko et al., 2018). The extent to which participants demonstrate career adaptability and work volition (influenced by interacting factors associated with social, relational circumstances and individual responses) contributes to the fulfilment or otherwise of intersecting needs, in the context of precarious work. Whilst PWT concepts

have been helpful in exploring needs (RQ1), they were less useful in illuminating meaning making (RQ2). They provided a useful framework for analyses, but could not capture more nuanced subjectivities.

PWT concepts (Duffy et al., 2016) were helpful in revealing how participants' needs are satisfied (or not). Several participants experienced a struggle to survive economically and had to accept work opportunities and welfare benefits available to them. In doing so they had to sacrifice some control over income, time structures and career preferences. Covid-19 forced some re-evaluation of working patterns and there were signs of improvement by the second wave of interviews. Temporal uncertainty and its impact on survival needs is not explicitly addressed by PWT. However, in related work on precarity, Blustein et al. (2025) suggest how such uncertainty contributes to poor mental health and diminishes positive everyday experiences. Especially at wave one, the data illustrate how participants were often getting by, managing to survive rather than thrive. The safety net provided by welfare benefits in wave one and an improvement to economic conditions in wave two were crucial to participants. They were able to improvise and draw upon resources from and beyond their working contexts to satisfy survival needs but even with improving circumstances, this was often felt to be temporary.

Contextual factors adversely affecting participants often appeared to be outside of their control. Even for participants, for whom precarious work was already normalized, the struggle for economic survival evoked fear, despair and anxiety amongst participants. Most were forced to turn to resources outside of work such as family and friends and/or public employment services to satisfy social connection needs. Adaptive ability to respond to precarious work depended on material circumstances and relational/individual resources. Elements of both career adaptability and work volition were important in assisting individuals to satisfy at least partially, social connection and self-determination needs. Both social support and critical consciousness were shown to insulate participants from the most damaging consequences of precarious work. Regarding social support, there were numerous examples of how employers and employment services managed uncertain circumstances with sensitivity. Their practical help was appreciated and contributed to dignity (Allan & Blustein, 2022); in contrast, careless or exploitative treatment was acutely felt.

A need for self-determination, albeit constrained or unfulfilled, was evident in how participants sought to exercise some control over their work circumstances. Orientations to uncertainties intersected with career adaptability and reflexive approaches to career identity

and work volition. However, PWT concepts cannot fully address the complex reflexive rationalizations adopted by participants. We have observed that for some, e.g., students, precarious work can be considered a rite of passage or stopgap to be tolerated before a chosen career starts. Meanwhile for others, e.g., recent graduates, it is associated with the juggling of trade-offs between work factors. In contrast for creative workers, it is accepted, and sometimes idealized as a normalized part of a creative career. For others, it can represent being stuck and as something that is hazardous and very difficult to escape. The varied ways participants made meaning of circumstances resonate with research (Mrozowski & Trappmann, 2020; Trappmann et al., 2023) which explores worker subjectivities. Several participants showed confidence to control their future work, which contrasts with the pessimism reported by the older workers in Blustein's (2019), indicating both youthful optimism and/or acceptance of a neoliberal social imaginary (Kesisoglou et al., 2016). Several participants rationalized their work to be meaningful and contributing to society, and this included creative work, caring work, and hospitality work.

Individual and social resources were important in making meaning of precarious work. The precarious nature of employment did not necessarily prevent its wider value to society being understood with scope for satisfaction of social contribution needs. Demonstrating critical reflection, many participants were highly critical of contemporary work conditions, highlighting poor practice from employers and/or public services. Many expressed disenchantment with a neoliberal environment for their relations with work. The sense of shared disruption reduced the risk of individuals blaming themselves for precarious work circumstances and any perceived failure of career goals. However, none demonstrated the political efficacy or critical action proposed to be part of critical consciousness in PWT (Duffy et al., 2016). These were work environments where the trade union presence was weak, reducing scope for collective resistance. Rather, resistance to precarity was individual and resource dependent. Other research indicates that even where work is isolating, workers may create supportive community, e.g., Gregory's (2020) account of couriers in Edinburgh and Tassinari and Maccarrone (2019) study of solidarity in the gig economy in Italy.

The use of a QLR research design (Neale, 2018) enabled observation of the dynamics of change over time and could assist in chronicling the reflexivity of participants triggered by the unique Covid-19 period. Over the course of the research, participants became resourceful in making their own meaning of

circumstances which was an important way for them to resist negative aspects of precarity. It was notable how participant perspectives evolved over time. The hope and optimism amongst some of the participant group points to the importance of timely interventions from public support agencies and employers to capitalize on this. For many, at wave two, they were able to recognize how the fears they had felt at wave one had dissipated. Participant positivity is also a reflection of improved economic conditions at wave two (see [Table 1](#)). At both waves, they were able to recognize and talk extensively about labour market injustices but felt they had limited collective or political influence to improve societal issues around precarious work. The prevalence of poor mental health was a major barrier to be able to draw upon individual resources/strategies and appeared to endure for some participants over both waves.

Limitations

A limitation of the study is its shortness; young people may not remain so upbeat if precarity continues for them, especially as personal responsibilities associated with the life course change. In addition, many of the participant groups were from a relatively higher socioeconomic and educational background. It therefore includes fewer workers who have low levels of education and/or those with more economic constraints. However, our study contributes insights about shared generational challenges that go beyond narrower definitions of marginalization. The application of a PWT lens, alongside our clear presentation of context, contributes to the “transferability” of findings, a concept advocated by Braun and Clarke ([2021](#)).

Theoretical contribution

The lived experience of participants in this study has been usefully illuminated by elements of the PWT approach. However, some of the evidence suggests that there are considerations that are beyond the scope of the PWT model. Importantly, the shock of the pandemic contributed to a deeper level of reflexivity, as participants articulated their interactions with contextual factors. Despite similar circumstances, location and backgrounds they respond reactively and proactively in different ways. This aligns with research that argues that workers are reflexive and develop individual and diverse ways to make sense of precarity (Archer, [2012](#); Blustein et al., [2025](#); Selenko et al., [2018](#)). Notably, PWT does not address the culturally or generationally nuanced ways that individuals make meaning or act upon their “human needs” in relation to work. We observe that PWT may take reflexivity for

granted and is therefore not best suited for answering fully the second research question about meaning-making. An analysis of needs in conjunction with a micro-sociological approach to processes of reflexivity (Archer, [2007](#)) could be valuable for future research with PWT concepts. Notably, in a helpful complement to his original PWF/PWT body of work, Blustein et al.'s ([2025](#)), critical framework of precarity suggests diverse responses of resistance, adaptation and resignation. Our research has also considered what rationalizations sit alongside such responses. Furthermore, although critical consciousness appears to align with reflexivity, its focus on critical action was not relevant to our participants, and its conceptualization within PWT risks downplaying the importance of critical reflection, irrespective of whether it leads to political efficacy and critical action. Finally, the value and role of trade unions and wider political action and employment rights in addressing precarity and securing decent work is largely beyond the scope of psychological theorizing even in PWT. It might be productively used alongside wider socio-political and collectivist perspectives on precarity (Alberti et al., [2018](#); Gregory, [2020](#); Tassinari & Maccarrone, [2019](#)).

Concluding remarks

In summary, precarious work contributes to young workers’ marginalization with risks of adverse impact to income security, mental health and wellbeing. Even in the context of precarious work, human needs as defined by PWT can be met, albeit partially/temporarily. Individual resources and responses (i.e., career adaptability, work volition, critical consciousness) and social resources (social support via employment relationships, employment support and career advice, community belonging) can insulate against the damaging impacts of precarity and provide pathways into decent work. However, this research identified some areas that are not adequately addressed by PWT and could usefully be considered in future elaborations of the theory. Firstly, the role of reflexivity and work identity; it is important for research to explore the capacity of workers to reflect on their work identity and its wider social context, including what for example, PWT concepts might mean to young people themselves. The ability to be reflexive contributes to individual resistance of precarity, irrespective of whether this leads to an elevated level of critical consciousness as defined by PWT. Secondly, the absence of critical action and political efficacy amongst participants in our study highlights that this is an area to be developed for career guidance practice, theory and research. Such a focus could help to

create collective solutions to precarious work, to benefit young workers and society as a whole.

Notes

1. 2023. UK National Living Wage for over-23s: £10.42 an hour. UK National Minimum Wage for those aged 21–22: £10.18. UK National Minimum Wage for 18 to 20-year-olds: £7.49.
2. Lockdown was the term used to describe UK Government restrictions on movement and public gathering during the pandemic.
3. Emergency government support for workers temporarily laid off during the pandemic.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author [FC] upon reasonable request.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the study was secured via Manchester Metropolitan University (Ethos Approval Number 25566).

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