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ABSTRACT

Abstract

While there are many effective metrics for quantifying economic precarity, talking to young people about their experiences in the labour and housing markets reveals a gap in explanatory language around living in/through crisis. In particular, in my research with Canadian millennials (born from the early 1980s through the mid-90s), although they could state the facts about how hard it is to get a good job or afford decent housing, what this pervasive sense of insecurity feels like is much harder to put into words. For many, a generalized sense of precariousness invades everyday life, even when work and housing are relatively secure. Thinking through this sense of anxiety, that the future might not be any better than the present and that young people might not be as well off as their parents, leads to a generational understanding of economic crisis – and for a group of young adults who came of age during the downturn of 2008–2009, examining how they talk (or cannot talk) about precarity is revealing.

KEYWORDS: Precarity, millennials, work, interviews, Canada

Introduction

While there are many effective metrics for quantifying economic precarity, talking to young people about their experiences in the labour and housing markets reveals a gap in explanatory language around living in/through crisis. In particular, in my research with Canadian millennials (born from the early 1980s through the mid-90s), although they could *state the facts* about how hard it is to get a good job or afford decent housing, the experience of this pervasive *sense of insecurity* is much harder to put into words. For many, a generalized sense of precariousness invades everyday life, even when work and housing are relatively secure. Thinking through this sense of anxiety, that the future might not be any better than the present and that young people might not be as well off as their parents, leads to a generational understanding of economic crisis – and for a group of young adults who came of age during the downturn of 2008–2009, considering why they can't talk about precarity is revealing. These observations emerge from research projects with young adults, examining precarious work and co-residence with parents (Worth [2016](#), Worth [2017](#)). Because of the length and format of this commentary, there is not space to include interviewee's testimony—moreover, the substance of my comments is on what cannot be talked about. I focus here on three interconnected reflections about why it might be difficult for millennials to talk about economic insecurity: (1) precarity as an unremarkable norm, (2) the millennial 'me,' and (3) the concept of hedging, a way to deal with future uncertainty in the present. I sum up by considering how precarity can be understood as a *relation* to understand work and life. My aim is to highlight the challenge of working with an experience/concept like precarity, but also why it is vital to examine this slippery idea.

Precarity as an unremarkable norm

My work with young people began with 16–25 year olds, focusing on the process of school–work transitions. My research with this group, who had yet to enter the labour market, centred on their

expectations for the future. One of my findings was that hopeful expectations of a comfortable, stable work life in the future helped young people manage current challenges (Worth [2009](#)). In subsequent work with millennial women and their experience of work (Worth [2016](#)) and millennials who live with their parents (Worth [2017](#)), I was interested to find out what happened when the hoped for future of secure, meaningful well-paid work did not materialize for all. In particular, for millennials in Canada who were born between 1980 and 1995, many in the leading edge of the cohort graduated into the economic crisis of 2008–2009 meaning that permanent full-time jobs with good benefits were increasingly difficult to find.

Yet, asking millennials about their experience of work was somewhat challenging, as precarity – in the sense of a labour condition – was an unremarkable norm. Short-term, contract labour was the only kind of work that many respondents had experienced. In my research, I use the approach of ‘critical moments’ to organize the interview encounter (Thomson *et al.* [2002](#)). Critical moments are highly consequential, setting young people on to one pathway or another. The importance of these moments is often recognized in hindsight, as participants remark on change and make comparisons with how things used to be and how things are now. In my research with young adults and their experience of work, I needed a different approach. In my interviews with dozens of young adults, work was just work; while they very easily told me about different jobs they had had, there were rarely any epiphanies about the consequences of these experiences, as the precarious aspects of these jobs were often expected and therefore commonplace. Moreover, as young people see the same issues (unemployment, underemployment, contract work) in the lives of their friends, precarity is normalized and typical. I wanted to understand how young adults experienced precarity in its myriad forms, so my interviews eschewed difficult ‘why’ questions, in favour of ‘what’ and ‘how.’ According to Silverman ([2013](#), p. 85), qualitative research can ‘locate the interactional sequences (“how”) in which participants’ meanings (“what”) are deployed. Having established the character of some phenomenon, it can then (but only then) move on to answer “why” questions by examining how that phenomenon is organisationally embedded.’ In effect, meaning can be drawn from the mundane and everyday through the interview (or conversational) dynamic. Working life stories – including the foundational *Working* by Terkel ([1972](#)), allow for insight into the ‘why’ of working conditions, including precarious ones, even though this is often hard to name explicitly (Foster [2013](#), Ba’ [2014](#)). It is important to note that my interest is not about the use of the term ‘precarity’ specifically; naming work as ‘insecure’ or ‘uncertain’ or any other stand-in for ‘precarious’ was also difficult.

Finally, Millar’s ([2017](#)) work offers an important critique of the political potential of precarity that has relevance to my project with this commentary. She uses Thorkelson’s ([2016](#)) research with contingent faculty in France to argue that precarité is often used in solidarity with workers, not by workers themselves. While I do not expect my respondents to be situated in this European history about the politics of precarity, the unwillingness of contingent faculty in France to use the term about themselves aligns with my findings; according to Millar ([2017](#), p. 5), ‘One reason precarity failed to resonate with the very workers it was meant to describe was that it signified an overexploited, degraded existence that few people were comfortable identifying as their own.’ Moreover, many found nothing new or exceptional in this discourse as – work had always felt precarious.

The flexible, millennial ‘me’

This section details how some millennials do talk about work, often in individualistic terms and through the lens of flexibility. First, when I have discussed my research with young adults at conferences and colloquia, I have been asked why millennials have not taken to the streets to protest insecure work. Yet, as the project of neoliberalism consistently tells (young) people, their success or failure is on them. Many young people have invested in a very personal conception of choice within the life course, connected to education, work, and family life. According to Gershon ([2017](#)), this

extends to managing one's personal brand and marketing yourself to employers. Very few talk about the often formidable structural inequalities they face because they go unrecognized in a society that valorizes personal achievement.

Second, the language of 'insecure' versus 'flexible work' is important. For Neilson and Rossiter (2005),

it is the doubleness of precarity that is the substrate of post-Fordist capital – a desire for greater flexibility and perceived freedom to choose one's style of work (the expressive capacity of labour-power) coupled with an increased uncertainty, not to mention frequent struggle, that is normative to the experience of life (ontological insecurity).

Discourses of flexibility can put a positive spin on precarity. Returning to the dynamics of interviews, the urge to tell a happy story, where people 'subjectively enhance the value of impending outcomes that are contrary to their own consciously held interests' – what psychologists call 'sweet lemons' can be strong (Kay *et al.* 2002). For example, rather than feeling bad that you have not been able to get a secure full-time job with benefits, the narrative shifts to idealizing short-term contracts that allow freedom and change – being successful within the world of work as it is. Few of the young adults I have worked with used flexibility solely in a positive light; those who did often had privilege of one kind or another that meant their work was inherently less risky (e.g. a partner who was willing to financially stabilize their endeavours). Yet, some young adults put a value on self-precariation as an aspect of authentic creative labour. Lorey (2006, pp. 187–88) writes about:

the ways in which ideas of autonomy and freedom are constitutively connected with hegemonic modes of subjectivation in Western, capitalist societies. The focus of this text is accordingly on the extent to which 'self-chosen' precariation contributes to producing the conditions for being able to become an active part of neo-liberal political and economic relations.

Another part of this story that valorizes flexibility is connected to entrepreneurship and self-employment, as well as what has been termed the millennial side hustle (Thieme 2017). While entrepreneurship is a growing part of the economy in Canada, for young adults (and others) it can also be a way to disguise un/underemployment. While some of my respondents made their salary from freelancing, others simply had aspirations to support themselves through self-employment, and others wanted to avoid a perceived gap in a resume by being a 'LinkedIn CEO.' In Canada, self-employment grew in the recent economic downturn (LaRochelle-Côté 2010), and its use as a coping strategy or buffer– or even as a performance of labour market success– is a practice I would like to examine further.

Finally, across all my work with young people, participants asked me if they were typical, on some level wanting to place their experience in a wider narrative or experience. Similar to Hall's (2017) experiences, my own research encounter often involved participants asking questions to me and about me, often with pleased but resigned surprise that other people involved in the research also had a hard time getting a job or difficulty balancing a changing work schedule with caring responsibilities. So while respondents tend to put a positive spin on their working lives and personalize their 'failures,' they are relieved to hear that others are in the same boat. I see this as an opening, a small way forward, and I have returned results of research to participants so that they can see how they fit in with their cohort (Worth & Tomaszczyk 2017, Worth 2008). This section has considered individualized flexibility as one of the explanatory frameworks that young adults are comfortable using to explain their working lives, where precarity remains present but below the surface. In the following section, precarity is again revealed by its absence, young people spoke about the present and resisted talking about an uncertain future.

Hedging, uncertainty, and the collapse of long-term thinking

The previous sections discuss why young adults cannot talk about precarity, and often use the more positive language of flexibility instead. This section adds a temporal element: thinking through why many young adults find it difficult to talk about the future. According to Bauman ([2007](#): 3):

the collapse of long-term thinking, planning and acting, and the disappearance or weakening of social structures in which thinking, planning and acting could be inscribed for a long time to come, leads to a splicing of [...] individual lives into a series of short term projects and episodes which are in principle infinite, and do not combine into the kinds of sequences to which concepts like 'development', 'maturation', 'career' or 'progress; (all suggesting a preordained order of succession) could be meaningfully applied. A life so fragmented stimulates 'lateral rather than 'vertical' orientations.

When you no longer think in long-term plans (or even hopes), precarity becomes hidden by just-in-time decision-making and an increasingly popular language about flexibility and responsiveness to change. For the young people I spoke with in Toronto, planning for the future was not something many spent time on; it was a waste of time because they could not anticipate what would happen next. Instead, concerns centred on making sense of the present, including current work and housing challenges, looking after the 'now.' For those who contemplated the future, many spoke about a distant ideal, rather than a planned achievement – where people would, for example, someday, hopefully, have a full-time job with benefits, but young people often could not talk about how to get there from here. Berlant ([2011](#), p. 54) writes about this as the 'historical present,' with the aim of 'explaining crisis-shaped subjectivity amid the ongoingness of adjudication, adaptation, and improvisation.' Elsewhere she describes the historical present as 'an impasse, a thick moment of ongoingness' where the fantasy of the good life is maintained and held onto (Berlant [2011](#), p. 200). In my work, this has emerged through some young adults' explicit acceptance of what one termed 'temporary exploitation' at work, while holding onto a somewhat elusive hope that it would change in the future.

Where the future does partially emerge (and young people talk about coping with precarity) is through the practice of hedging; Newhouse ([2017](#), p. 512) has 'shown hedging to be the laborious and generative efforts at mediating the future [...] Hedging is also the work of attuning oneself to such radical uncertainty and being ready to jump at the arrival of the unforeseen.' In my work, millennials moving back home to live with parents functions as a hedge against future uncertainty. Not only did young adults move home (or remain at home) to manage current challenges, many explicitly used co-residence with parents to put themselves into a more stable position for the future. For example, some young people move home to save on rent, building up a down payment to get on the property ladder. Others live at home so they can afford to go to school, building up skills/experience to be more competitive in the labour market. Ettlinger ([2007](#), p. 325) argues that

The everydayness of precarity holds clues as to how people routinely, if implicitly, develop strategies that permit feelings of certainty amid uncertainty. People grope for the surety to navigate social, political, economic, and cultural life through everyday discursive and material practice.

It has been important for my work to understand that not everyone has the ability to hedge uncertainty in the same ways and that precarity is connected to how actors are differently situated (Zeiderman *et al.* [2015](#)). Just as flexible work can be thought of as a form of privileged precarious work, hedges such as moving home to live with parents are not available to all.

Situating precarity/precariousness/precaritization/precariat

Precarity has been framed in diverse ways across the social sciences and humanities – and this flexibility in terminology reflects how much work this concept does. At its most straightforward, objective measures of precarity are interested in how employment has shifted away from full-time, permanent jobs with benefits to work that is increasingly part-time (see Bourdieu [1998](#)) or contract while subjective definitions of precarity concern ‘life worlds that are inflected with uncertainty and instability’ (Waite [2009](#), p. 416). Yet, in Puar’s et al. ([2012](#)) virtual roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, and others, the concept of precarity gets more layered. For Butler, meanings of precariousness include:

(1) precariousness, a function of our social vulnerability and exposure that is always given some political form, and precarity as differentially distributed, and so one important dimension of the unequal distribution of conditions required for continued life; but also (2) precaritization as an ongoing process, so that we do not reduce the power of precarious to single acts or single events. Precaritization allows us to think about the slow death that happens to targeted or neglected populations over time and space. (Puar et al. [2012](#), 169)

Moreover, Lorey’s work on ‘self-precarization’ focuses on the workplace, where ‘everybody has to become “creative” and to design her/himself to sell her/his whole personality on the market of affective labor’ (Puar et al. [2012](#), p. 164). In addition to these framings of precarity as a form of labour and a feeling of insecurity, Standing’s ([2011](#)) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* gives a class identity to the precarity discussion, where identity is no longer based on work. What emerges is that we can use precarity (in all its conceptual forms) as a *relation* to understand work and life. According to Millar ([2017](#)), ‘precariety is both a socio-economic condition and an ontological experience (Neilson and Rossiter [2008](#)). Or better yet, it aims to capture the relationship between precarious labor and precarious life.’ This relational framing is quite useful conceptually; yet, this analytical depth is a signal of how difficult precarity can be to pin down in practice, as an experience/condition/feeling for people to narrate. Trying to understand the everydayness of precarity within a research encounter can be challenging.

To sum up, this commentary has considered how young adults make sense of precarity. My interest is not about whether people actually use the term ‘precariety,’ but instead I have been thinking through some reasons why the experience of precarity, both objective and subjective, – might be difficult to talk about. For many, precarious work is an unremarkable norm, an experience that feels common and everyday, and consequently not worth mentioning. For others, not identifying as a precarious worker is about eschewing a negative label. On top of this, there is a tendency to individualize experience; perhaps reinforced by the one-to-one research interview, where work is a personal success (or failure), and it is challenging to see oneself in the context of wider structural changes (such as the decreasing number of positions in the ‘standard employment relationship’ of full-time, permanent positions). Some young adults describe work that is objectively precarious through the positive framing of flexibility, and it is interesting to consider how self-employment fits into young people’s imaginings of ‘successful’ work. Finally, just as flexibility is a way of talking about precarity, examining how young people hedge (act in the present to attempt to mitigate future uncertainty) is another way of indirectly getting at the experience of insecurity.

For my research, I have found that a generational analysis can be useful to reveal the unremarkable, as this kind of analysis examines how a cohort of people (in all their diversity) experience economic, political, and social events at a particular age. Generational thinking is explicitly a way of scaling up from individual experience and creates a context that can be revealing of difference (see also Vanderbeck [2017](#)). In my work with millennial women, many spoke about what their mother did at the same age, as a way of reflecting on her own life. When considering how young adults (cannot) talk about the diverse concept of precarity, from a labour market condition to an affective condition or

sense of ontological insecurity, how respondents speak, the words they choose, and what is not said can be just as revealing as how millennials present themselves.

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