


Precarious work and precarious workers: Towards an improved conceptualisation

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Abstract

Discussion of the implications of precarious work for individual workers remains hesitant and often confused. A clear conceptualisation would separate out five analytical levels: precariousness in employment, precarious work, precarious workers individually and as an emerging class, and precarity as a general condition of social life. To illustrate the need to avoid slippage between the concepts of precarious work and precarious workers, we present one ‘theory-relevant’ example – full-time secondary school students in Australia who hold part-time jobs in the retail sector. Their part-time jobs are indeed precarious but the negative effects on the student-workers are modest, both because participation in precarious work is limited (moderate weekly hours and intermittent work within the framework of a brief stage of the life course) and because many (though not all) of the associated risks are cushioned by structural forces such as access to alternative income sources and career paths. At the same time, however, a longitudinal perspective reveals that the same group of student-workers faces major risks in the future, as a result of increasingly insecure labour markets. Reflections on this example help to identify conceptual tools that can be applied to a wide range of other examples of precarious work.

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Introduction

Precariousness and precarious work, broadly identified with high levels of labour insecurity, are prominent themes in recent employment relations research (Standing, 2011; Vosko, 2010; Vosko et al., 2009). Researchers have produced a rich and expanding literature that describes dimensions of precariousness and forms of precarious work, and its incidence and trends in advanced capitalist societies (Kalleberg, 2011; McKay et al., 2012). Although most studies are descriptive, some explore causes, highlighting how employers, within a framework of porous labour regulation, introduce labour-use practices that cut costs and shift risk onto individual employees (Frade and Darmon, 2005; Rafferty and Yu, 2010). The concept of precariousness has been extensively debated and refined (Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013; Kalleberg and Hewison, 2013). Yet areas of uncertainty remain.

As currently used by researchers, precariousness spans at least five different levels of social life. At the most basic level, *precariousness in employment* is a multi-dimensional concept referring to objective job characteristics that involve insecurity, such as a low level of regulatory protection, low wages, high employment insecurity and a low level of employee control over wages, hours and working conditions (Vosko, 2010: 2; Vosko et al., 2009: 7). In this sense, precariousness overlaps with a cognate concept of poor 'job quality' (Burchell et al., 2014).

At a second level, *precarious work* is understood as waged work exhibiting several dimensions of precariousness (Standing, 2011). Such jobs are often, though not always, non-standard jobs (Vosko et al., 2009: 7–9). At this level, multiple dimensions of precariousness seem to cluster in particular jobs so that a relative increase in precarious work or 'bad' jobs is seen as contributing to employment polarisation in advanced capitalist societies (Hurley et al., 2013; Kalleberg, 2011).

A third level concerns *precarious workers*, generally understood as persons not just engaged in precarious work but also enduring the necessary consequences of precariousness (Anderson, 2010: 303–304). The notion of a *precarious generation* is advanced by scholars who focus on youth (Kretsos, 2010). At this level, precariousness in employment is seen as having a strong and pervasive impact, dispersing insecurity through the lives of the workers.

A fourth level is that of the *precarariat*. Standing's initial definition of this group in labour market terms, as workers who lack seven forms of labour security, is extended in his recent work into arguments concerning shared social and political attributes. The precariat – analogous to the 19th-century notion of a proletariat – is identified as a class-in-the-making that is emerging from the ranks of precarious workers (Standing, 2011).

Finally, a fifth level is that of *precarity*. This term, used initially by European social movements and then by academics, refers to a generalised set of social conditions and an associated sense of insecurity, experienced by precarious workers but extending to other

domains of social life such as housing, welfare provision and personal relationships (Anderson, 2010; Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013). In human geography and in studies of migrant labour, precarity is understood in terms of ‘life-worlds that are inflected with uncertainty and instability’ (Waite, 2009: 416). The recent notion of ‘hyper-precarity’ signals the effects of the extreme forms of labour exploitation experienced by migrant workers (Lewis et al., 2015).

These five levels are not always clearly distinguished. The first two are connected in straightforward ways and, though still subject to debate, have proven their value in guiding empirical research on employment trends (Kalleberg and Hewison, 2013). But connections at the other levels are more blurred. Much current debate focuses on the fourth level and the provocative thesis of an emerging precariat (Bremner, 2013). This article, however, takes up the equally problematic connection between the second and the third level – between precarious work and precarious workers.

The underlying issue explored here concerns the implications of precarious work for individual workers – their physical, mental and social well-being and also, more broadly, their agency and the way in which they integrate paid work into other domains of social life. To what extent is the precariousness of work transmitted to the worker? This difficult but important area requires careful conceptualisation in order to extend research on precarious work and develop policies to combat its effects.

Such careful conceptualisation is needed, given the diversity of individual work experiences and their varied connections to other domains of life. In contemporary Australia, precarious (or ‘insecure’) workers could include a recent graduate doing an unpaid ‘internship’ at an accounting firm, a single mother trying to achieve an adequate income with part-time contract cleaning jobs, a recent migrant working long weekly hours as a kitchenhand, a blue-collar process worker deployed by a labour-hire company and a young academic trying to establish a career through sessional teaching (Howe et al., 2012; Pocock and Skinner, 2012). If we extend our perspective to other societies, both advanced capitalist societies and developing nations, the range of individual experiences of precarious work widens even further (McKay et al., 2012; Vosko et al., 2009). In each case, workers are engaged in precarious work, but the experience and the potential impact are likely to differ in complex but socially patterned ways.

This article seeks to improve conceptualisation in this important area. The second section reviews existing efforts to theorise the connection between precarious work and workers. It promotes the value of a critical realist perspective in identifying the structural forces that produce contingent effects on workers (Archer, 1995). The third section introduces an illustrative example – full-time secondary school students who hold part-time jobs in the Australian retail sector. The fourth section argues that such part-time work is appropriately called precarious work, characterised by a distinct configuration of elements of precariousness. The fifth section explores the social forces shaping the impact of precarious work on student-workers, and the final section offers some brief conclusions.

The article contributes to current debates in two areas. First, it outlines conceptual tools that help to capture the complex and contingent relation between precarious work and workers. Second, it throws new light on student-workers and precarious work.

From precarious work to precarious workers?

To make progress in conceptualising the complex and contingent relation between precarious work and workers, it is necessary to be able to analyse both: (a) precise forms of precarious work and (b) differences among individual workers. The former presents few difficulties for an analysis that understands precariousness in employment as multi-dimensional. The latter, however, is subject to fundamental theoretical disputes, such as the best way to conceptualise social action, human agency, choice and subjectivity (Stones, 2009).

The research literature on precarious work – and much of the cognate literature on ‘bad’ jobs – reveals the difficulties impeding the second phase of analysis. Some scholars move freely from precarious work to precarious workers (or merge the two as ‘precarious labour’), but most, conscious of causal complexities and the challenge of accommodating wide variation in individual experiences of precarious work, proceed more tentatively or sidestep conceptual difficulties.

One common temptation is to acknowledge the diversity of individual experiences but to identify this diversity with differences in personal attributes, usually classified as ‘subjective’. This approach presumes that perceptions, attitudes, work orientations and subjective identities can be regarded as the prime movers behind human agency. By contrast, we argue that while social action contains a subjective dimension, it is fundamentally shaped by the institutions and social relations within which individual agency is embedded (Archer, 1995). In order to explain forms of social action, it is necessary to uncover the social context constraining or enabling social action (Edwards, 2005).

Social context is invoked in some research literature on precarious workers, but rarely in a systematic way. Using alternative terms such as ‘vulnerable workers’, some scholars (Burgess et al., 2013; Sargeant and Tucker, 2009) succeed in opening up space for more contingency in the relation between work and the worker. But much depends on how ‘vulnerability’ is understood. Current literature on vulnerability acknowledges that structural forces such as management control, industry conditions and relations of competition are important within the workplace, but once the discussion moves outside the workplace, it tends to be narrowly channelled into a list of personal attributes that weaken the ability of the individual worker to resist workplace risks (Burgess et al., 2013: 4084–4085; Kalleberg, 2011: 78–80, 87).

In grappling with social context, other scholars offer a useful notion of ‘social location’, defined as ‘the interaction between social relations, such as gender, and legal and political categories, such as citizenship’ (Vosko, 2010: 2). This perspective is developed most fully in Clement et al. (2009), who argue that the relationship between precarious work and a broader notion of precarious lives is contingent (p. 244). The social conditions in which workers’ lives are embedded, such as household structures, kinship networks and access to welfare services independent of labour market status, may modify the effects of precarious work, for example, when welfare states provide financial and other support ‘buffering’ the impact of poor labour market conditions (Clement et al., 2009: 241–244).

Interview-based case studies may provide contextual insights. For example, a case study of room attendants in upmarket hotels in London, Glasgow and Sydney (Knox et al.,

2015) starts with the observation that housekeeping jobs in hotels are widely and accurately regarded as poor quality jobs, defined by hard work, low skill, little progression and low pay. It notes, however, that individual workers may have ‘different, even positive, subjective experiences and perceptions of the same objectively “bad job”’ (Knox et al., 2015: 1548). The analysis identifies a wide range of salient factors, such as qualifications, alternative employment options, stage of the life course, family responsibilities and immigrant or local status, and then, importantly, shows how these factors can mediate between the characteristics of the job and the experiences of the worker.

Nevertheless, even the most advanced case studies often reveal the tug of subjective understandings of diverse experiences of precarious work (see also Cooke et al., 2013; Johnson, 2015). Thus, the case study of room attendants wrongly labels individual experiences, as well as perceptions, as ‘subjective’ (Knox et al., 2015: 1548), failing to note that the former have an objective dimension that requires careful attention. Experiences of low pay, for example, entail struggles for livelihood that are resistant to personal preferences and characteristics. Different experiences of low pay are linked to social structures, both inside and outside the workplace; experiences may be softened by the availability of alternative income sources or hardened by the demands of high fixed costs (e.g. debt repayments, ongoing personal costs such as medicine and ongoing household costs such as childcare) (Masterman-Smith and Pocock, 2008).

Much discussion of the impact of precarious work betrays a flat ontology that jumbles together social institutions, social action, ascriptive characteristics, experiences and attitudes. A better starting point is the layered analysis associated with critical realism, moving beyond the surface level of perception (‘the empirical’), to explore events and actions at the level of ‘the actual’, in turn influenced by social structures at a further level of ‘the real’ (Archer, 1995; Fleetwood, 2011: 22; Sayer, 2000: 11–12). Social structures are seen as having causal powers which are ‘emergent’ and contextual, being activated only under certain conditions and having varied consequences dependent on their intersection with other social structures (Sayer, 2000: 12–17).

Applied to the impact of precarious work, this perspective sees the employment relation as a central social structure in capitalist societies (Edwards, 2005). It possesses causal powers that can be expected to shape the experiences of individual workers inside and outside the workplace, but the precise impact is likely to depend on specific characteristics of the employment relation, including the presence or absence of dimensions of precariousness (Thompson and Vincent, 2010). The impact will also depend on elements of the broader social context, for example, conditions that activate the risks of precariousness, such as the dependence of full-time workers on the wage for their livelihood, and other social structures such as family relations, social norms, education, financial institutions and welfare regimes (Fleetwood, 2011; Rubery, 2005).

Institutions and social relations outside the workplace can act to *mediate* the relation between work and the worker. Such mediation does not eliminate or qualify the character of work as precarious, but it can *modify* the potential impact of precarious work on the worker by either amplifying or cushioning risks. *Amplifying* occurs, for example, when immigration rules give workers a precarious migrant status (Anderson, 2010; Sargeant and Tucker, 2009) or when unfamiliarity with local workplace customs heightens the risk of illness and injury at work (e.g. Lewchuk et al., 2008; Underhill and Quinlan, 2011).

But *cushioning* is also evident, for example, when welfare state payments reduce the risk of low pay leading to poverty (Clement et al., 2009: 244; Kalleberg, 2011: 87).

An example: Secondary school students working part-time

To underline the importance of contextual conditions and to illustrate the way in which they can operate as mediating factors, this article, drawing on previous empirical research (Campbell and Chalmers, 2008; McDonald et al., 2010, 2011; Price, 2015; Price et al., 2011, 2014), takes up one example of the impact of precarious work: the experiences of full-time secondary school students in Australia with part-time jobs in the retail sector. Although school-aged workers are employed in what are readily described as precarious jobs, they do not fit smoothly into the conventional understanding of precarious workers. As such, they represent a good platform for improving conceptualisation on the impact of precarious work. This example conforms to methodological advice about the value of developing theory through reflection on ‘theory-relevant’ or ‘theory-useful’ cases (Burawoy, 2009; Eisenhardt, 2002).

Combining full-time study and a part-time job – generally a casual part-time job after school, on weekends or during school holidays – is a common experience for Australian secondary school students. In June 2015, 30% of secondary students aged 15–19 were counted as employed, an increase from 24.2% in April 1986, but down from the peak recorded before the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008–2009 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2015a). The likelihood of having a job was higher for girls than for boys and slightly higher for students from middle-class rather than working-class households (Anlezark and Lim, 2011: 14–15, 18–21; House of Representatives, 2009: 10–11).

The proportion of Australian secondary school students that is employed is higher than in many other industrialised countries (House of Representatives, 2009: 10), and most students will have had some experience of part-time work by the time they finish school. The evidence suggests that working hours of employed school students are moderate, averaging 10 or fewer per week (House of Representatives 2009: 16–17; Patton and Smith, 2009: 218) – well within the conventional definition of ‘minimal’ part-time hours.

Many school students work in the retail sector, especially in food retailing and supermarkets, on the cash register or stacking shelves. As an industry division, retail offers numerous part-time jobs, thereby making it a good match for people seeking paid work that can be combined with other activities. The significance of part-time employment in retail has strengthened in recent decades in Australia (ABS, 2014), as in many advanced capitalist societies, where it can be linked to employer labour-use practices, developed in the context of the liberalisation of trading hours, the increased dominance of large firms, cost pressures and new deskilling technologies (Carré et al., 2010). Retail employers increasingly break up work into fragmented schedules that can be configured (and continuously adjusted) to meet changing demand and the need for labour cost discipline (Jany-Catrice and Lehdorff, 2005). Adjusting fragmented schedules, often at short notice, shifts risk to employees, at the expense of instability in their hours and income (Lambert, 2008).

The part-time retail workforce in Australia is skewed towards young workers – not only secondary school students but also tertiary students and young school leavers. Each group presents employers with distinct scheduling advantages and disadvantages. School students are available for small fractional amounts of work (Smith, 2004; Smith and Patton, 2011), but they tend to be free to work only at certain limited times of the day and week, making them more attractive as ‘gap fillers’ than as ‘time adjusters’ (Jany-Catrice and Lehndorff, 2005: 224–228).

Two points about pay-setting institutions are crucial in shaping employer strategies in low-wage sectors such as retail (Carré et al., 2010). First is the provision in Australia for discriminatory *age-related wages*, whereby employers are permitted to give reduced pay (‘junior rates’) to young workers (Carnie, 2012; Stewart and Van der Waarden, 2011). In the retail award, wage rates for juniors begin at 45% of the adult rate for those under 16 years and increase each year of age until the full adult rate applies at 21, recently reduced to 20 years of age (General Retail Industry Award, 2010), and currently subject to a union campaign for adult rates at 18 (Malinauskas, 2013). This gradual increase in rates also applies in the collective agreements of the major retail companies. Nearly all school students are employed under junior rates, which were estimated to cover around 10% of total retail employees in 2006 (Pech et al., 2009: 30).

The second feature is the provision for *casual employment*, generally understood as hour-by-hour or shift-by-shift employment that lacks the standard rights and entitlements associated with continuing and fixed-term employment (Campbell, 2004). Except for a right to a minimum daily engagement period, generally of 3 hours (Carnie, 2012), casual employees have little working-time security and can be employed on irregular and varying rosters, with little notice of changes. Most casual employees lack any effective protection against termination, or rights to a period of notice, since dismissal can be interpreted as just a failure to rehire (Creighton and Stewart, 2010: 198–204). Similarly, they lack access to the benefits that accrue to continuing workers, such as paid annual leave, paid public holidays and paid sick leave. According to labour regulation, casual workers are entitled to a pay loading, generally 25%, in lieu of benefits, but casual workers suffer an ‘earnings penalty’ in comparison with equivalent continuing workers (Watson, 2005: 378–382). In retail, casual workers constituted 40.1% of all employees in November 2013 (ABS, 2014). Most part-time jobs held by school students are casual: McDonald et al. (2010: 15) suggest the proportion is over 90%.

Is this precarious work?

The part-time jobs of school students in retail, reflecting dominant employer labour-use practices (Price et al., 2011), are relatively homogeneous. Despite differences in tasks, schedules, size of enterprise and workplace cultures, most are characterised by short hours, low hourly pay rates and casual status. In assessing whether this is precarious work and identifying its main characteristics, we use a (slightly modified) schema from Vosko (2010: 2; see Rodgers, 1989: 3), which identifies four dimensions of precariousness in employment: (1) a lack of regulatory protection, (2) low wages, (3) high employment insecurity and (4) low levels of employee control over wages, hours and working conditions.

Lack of regulatory protection

At first glance, student-workers appear to enjoy an adequate level of regulatory protection since they are covered, as are all employees, by statutory legislation (occupational health and safety, workers' compensation and the Australian National Employment Standards) and award regulation, underpinned by the provisions of the common law and supplemented for some employees by collective bargaining agreements (Bray and Stewart, 2013; Creighton and Stewart, 2010). In addition, school students are subject through state and territory legislation to special protections, such as minimum age limits for performance of particular kinds of work (Stewart and Van der Waarden, 2011), and this is backed up, at least in larger enterprises, by codes of conduct that aim to regulate employer and supervisor behaviour (Smith and Patton, 2009). All workers are entitled to join a union, suggesting an added layer of protection (Creighton and Stewart, 2010).

Protective regulation builds an important floor of minimum standards for many school students, but its effectiveness is undermined by employer non-compliance, prevalent in small retail enterprises (Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO), 2011). Moreover, casual employment status deprives employees of some standard employment protections prescribed in statutes and awards. Furthermore, it is unclear whether union membership adds much to employment protection for casual workers. Union density in retail overall is 13.9%, although density in food retailing – facilitated by collaboration between the major union, the Shop and Distributive Employees Association (SDA), and the major supermarket chains – is somewhat higher (25.7%) (ABS, 2013). Union membership encompasses casual workers, including some school students, but membership turnover is high, consistent with high job turnover, and does not necessarily lead to effective representation for such workers (Price et al., 2014).

Low wages

Low wages are characteristic of the retail sector (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (AWPA), 2014: 45; Pech et al., 2009: 21, 26–31), but the problem is especially acute for young workers because of the application of junior rates. Where employer non-compliance is widespread, hourly rates may fall below even the low rates specified in awards and agreements. For many part-time employees, low hourly rates are compounded by short working hours and variable schedules, producing very low and fluctuating weekly pay.

Employment insecurity

Short job tenure and high turnover are prominent features of retail jobs (AWPA, 2014: 40; Pech et al., 2009: 21–22). Although some school students stay in one part-time job for several years, for others, employment is unstable and short-term. Uncertainty about employment continuity is particularly salient for casual jobs, and unfair dismissal is a common complaint of secondary school students, often linked to a reduction in shifts as students grow older and are more expensive to employ (NSW Teachers Federation, 2007: 12–13).

Training is one pathway to greater security, both within a job and within an occupational career. But retail is predominantly composed of occupations that employers see as requiring little training (AWPA, 2014). Access to formal training tends to be low for all retail employees, with part-time and casual employees particularly disadvantaged (Productivity Commission, 2011: 395). Retail employers claim young workers gain useful ‘employability skills’ through informal job learning (Smith and Patton, 2011).

Low levels of employee control

Limited employee control over wages, hours and working conditions is a feature of part-time retail jobs, often associated with employer demands for ‘flexible scheduling’ (Campbell and Chalmers, 2008; Price, 2015). The majority of employed school children in a Queensland survey reported hours that varied from week to week (McDonald et al., 2010: 20–21). Most changes were initiated by the employer and included shifts cancelled after arrival at work, pressure to work through breaks, unreasonable short notice requests to work shifts and cutting of hours of students who had previously refused a shift (McDonald et al., 2010: 18–24).

Summary

In sum, part-time retail jobs held by school students can be accurately described as precarious work. Labour regulation establishes some minimum standards, but it leaves ample room for precariousness, mainly in the form of very low wages and high employment insecurity.

Precarious workers? What is the impact of this precarious work?

Much existing discussion of the impact of precarious work on student-workers identifies them as ‘vulnerable workers’, at risk through personal attributes such as limited employment relations knowledge, reluctance to report complaints, lack of confidence and vulnerability to bullying (FWO, 2010; House of Representatives, 2009: 76). Especially in an employment context involving low regulatory protection, where workers have to rely on individual bargaining power, these attributes are salient and can lead to higher risks of injury and ill-health at the workplace (Mayhew, 2005). Although retail has a lower rate of injuries than many industries (Australian Safety and Compensation Council, 2007), young workers in retail are likely to be exposed to higher risks than other retail workers. If these risks are realised, the consequences for individuals can be major and long-term (Underhill and Quinlan, 2011).

Reference to youth vulnerability is apt but partial. It singles out factors that act to *amplify* precariousness but misses important contextual forces that also mediate the impact of precariousness. Attention to social context suggests that most full-time secondary school students in Australia share a similar social location, characterised first by full-time engagement in education and second by membership of a family household as a dependent child who is reliant on significant parental support (financial, emotional and

practical). This anchors a distinctive type of participation in paid work which is subsidiary to school and family life, confined to a small number of aggregate hours per week and often only short-term and intermittent.

Consideration of social context helps to identify three salient conditions: (1) limited participation in employment, (2) access to an independent income source and (3) access to alternative career paths. These conditions do not eliminate precariousness for student-workers, but they tend to modify its impact by cushioning risks. In addition, a further element of the social context, more double-edged in its implications, concerns the fact that the social location of secondary school students is transient, linked to a brief stage in the life course. It is useful to consider each contextual condition in turn.

Limited participation in employment

Participation in employment for most school students is confined to moderate weekly hours and intermittent participation during the years of school attendance. Employment is a minor element in a pattern of life more fully occupied with other activities such as school-work and study, family life, sports and hobbies, and socialising. This implies a diminution of the conditions that could activate precariousness. Limited participation reduces exposure to workplace hazards, not only health and safety risks but also some of the broader risks of precariousness. Short hours of employment can be fitted into the demands of other aspects of life, softening the impact of low levels of control over hours. Employer-led variation in work schedules and short notice of changes provoke complaints from student-workers (McDonald et al., 2010: 21–22), but the problem of disruption is not as severe as the ‘desynching’ that can affect tertiary students working longer hours in more varied work schedules (Woodman, 2012).

Access to an alternative source of income

Most secondary school students rely on parents rather than wages from their part-time jobs to cover basic living costs such as food and shelter. Only a small minority of school students in jobs, between 5% and 10%, state that they need to provide income for their families (Abhayaratna et al., 2008: 93; McDonald et al., 2010: 16–18). Most student-workers work in order to gain money, but generally for discretionary spending or for a future expense such as a car (House of Representatives, 2009: 11–13).

Access to an alternative income source has been singled out as significant for understanding different work experiences in previous literature on casual workers and on precarious workers in general (Kalleberg, 2011; Standing, 2011: 59). It allows students to choose to limit their participation in employment. It limits the risk, prevalent in Australia, that part-time employment will be associated with underemployment, whereby part-time workers have to chase additional hours in either the same or a second job (ABS, 2015b). Similarly, access to alternative income cushions employment insecurity, as job loss does not threaten livelihood. The risk of school students being in poverty is not determined by the wage levels in their part-time jobs; instead, it is determined much more directly by the situation of the main earners in the household.

Access to alternative career paths

Similarly, most student-workers are not dependent on the job in retail for long-term career pathways. Students may see the part-time job as providing employability skills that could assist in getting future jobs (Abhayaratna et al., 2008: 93), but most see successful job search and career development in the future as dependent on other factors such as educational achievement and perhaps family advice and assistance (McDonald et al., 2011: 77–78).

Access to alternative career paths clearly softens the risks both of dismissal and limited job training. Dismissal is not a threat to career progression. Lack of formal training is of little consequence for most student-workers, since the main source of skills development for their long-term careers is located elsewhere – at secondary school or perhaps in future higher education.

Stage of the life course

Discussion of long-term careers leads to a fourth consideration, which in effect overshadows each of the three contextual conditions cited above. Being a secondary school student is a transient stage of the life course, lasting just a few years, prior to entering the varied pathways to adulthood, including crucial school-to-work transitions (Furlong and Kelly, 2005). Each of the elements most closely associated with this distinctive social location – full-time school attendance, family financial support, participation in part-time work after school or on the weekend, sports and hobbies and perhaps even friendship networks – is likely to dissipate or disappear in the near future. The full-time university or further education that follows secondary school for a growing proportion of youth is less likely to be accompanied by full financial support from families, leaving tertiary education students more reliant on part-time work and debt to meet their living costs.

A life-course perspective is important for analysing the consequences of precarious work for individual workers (Fuller, 2009; Mayer, 2004), and it is particularly important when the workers in question are young and near the start of a life-course trajectory. Analysis in terms of life stage has, however, double-edged implications for analysis of the impact of precarious work. On the one hand, it could be argued that the transience of the part-time job in retail reduces exposure to the hazards of precarious jobs. Research has failed to find any long-term negative effects of combining school with part-time paid work on either educational or employment outcomes (Anlezark and Lim, 2011; Patton and Smith, 2009; Vickers, 2011: 107–113). Participation in part-time work for students does not, as it does for adult women, lead to stalled careers and ‘wage scarring’ (Chalmers, 2013). Nor is there any firm evidence yet for the suggestive argument that young workers may be ‘scarred’ by poor experiences in their initial part-time jobs so that they adopt an ‘internalised flexibility’ and treat bad employment practices as normal (Morgan et al., 2013).

On the other hand, the life-course perspective reminds us that school students face challenges in the *next* stages of their life course, including challenges associated with episodes of precarious work. Australian research following two cohorts that were in later

secondary school in 1991 and 2005 points to the difficulties created by increasingly unstable and insecure labour markets, which offer young workers fewer full-time entry-level jobs leading on to secure employment, but more casualised jobs, both full-time and part-time (Cuervo and Wyn, 2011). The erosion of traditional pathways from study to work meant that many young workers from both cohorts struggled with precariousness, including underemployment, poor wages and inadequate skill development, in their post-school experiences (Wyn et al., 2010).

Discussion of insecure labour markets returns us to the first two levels of empirical research on precariousness. It draws attention to important contextual forces such as public policy, strongly influenced by neoliberalism, labour market deregulation, competitive pressures on firms and the spread of new business practices (Kalleberg, 2011; Rafferty and Yu, 2010). Overlapping these forces is the business cycle, which, in the wake of the GFC, has been characterised by weak labour demand and sharp increases in youth unemployment and underemployment (ABS, 2015b). This social context defines a major challenge to youth who are particularly exposed to risks in post-school stages of the life course, and it can intensify workforce fracturing, in which factors such as class, location, gender and disability status increasingly differentiate work and life experiences (Wyn et al., 2010).

The change in retail jobs described in a previous section ('An example: secondary school students working part-time') is itself one expression of increasingly insecure labour markets. In previous decades, retail offered a large number of full-time entry-level jobs for young workers, but employers have steadily restructured most entry-level retail jobs into casual part-time jobs, occupied by school students and tertiary students, while recruitment into management is increasingly through recruitment at graduate or higher certificate level (AWPA, 2014: 67–68). As a result, young school leavers who desire a full-time retail job often face a particularly difficult school-to-work transition, while seeking to earn a living wage and get a foot on the ladder of full-time work (Watson, 1994).

Discussion of youth pathways draws the analysis away from the impact of current jobs, but that is no reason for dismissing the relevance of the longitudinal perspective. Many students are already wrestling with what they see as the implications of insecure labour markets. Indeed, for many student-workers, the future casts a shadow over their current lives and shapes their decisions, such as what courses of study to choose. In this sense, the future is a structural force that demands to be integrated into analysis of the present.

A life-course perspective changes the conventional analysis of temporary and precarious jobs in terms of transition matrices. The part-time jobs in retail held by secondary school students are neither a 'bridge' towards other jobs nor a 'trap' (except perhaps for students desiring a long-term career in the industry). Most student-workers look elsewhere for the bridges to less precarious, good quality jobs, but finding these bridges has become increasingly difficult in a context of increasingly insecure youth labour markets.

Summary

Precarious part-time jobs in retail can have negative effects on student-workers. Nevertheless, this analysis suggests that the negative effects, both short-term and long-term, are modest.

Very low wages and high employment insecurity do not, in this example, operate to produce precarious workers or precarious lives in any meaningful sense.

The argument concerning modest effects in the present could be expressed in terms of degree so that our example would figure as a case of *hypo-precariousness* to match the ‘hyper-precariousness’ attributed to migrant workers (Lewis et al., 2015). But our argument, consistent with critical realism, aims to reach beyond a descriptive account of the degree of precariousness to include analysis of contextual conditions and how they operate to modify the impact of precariousness. A representation of this argument is presented in Figure 1.

This analysis also highlights the need to discuss structures associated with different stages in the life course (Pocock and Charlesworth, 2015). In our example, the same group of workers, although relatively insulated from risks of precarious work in the present, are exposed to severe risks from precarious work in the immediate future. The shift cannot be attributed to major changes either in the substance of the precarious work or in subjective attributes; instead, it is mainly due to the underlying change in the workers’ social location. The crucial institutions and social relations that serve to cushion negative effects at the current stage of the life course are missing – without being replaced by anything equivalent – in subsequent stages, leaving the workers more clearly exposed to the risks of precariousness in their work.

Conclusion

Research on precariousness spans at least five levels of application. The literature continues to struggle with the implications of precarious work (or poor job quality) for individual workers. The temptation to leap freely from precarious work to precarious workers (or precarious lives) should be resisted. The impact of precarious work is not uniform; instead, it is contingent. At the same time, differences in experiences of precarious work cannot be reduced to hypothetical differences in subjective attributes. The impact of precarious work demands careful conceptualisation and empirical research, to analyse both the particular form of precarious work and the differences among individual workers that stem from social location and contextual conditions.

To improve conceptualisation, this article has used one ‘theory-relevant’ example. We establish that the part-time retail jobs held by secondary school children are indeed precarious, but we argue that the negative effects on the student-workers are modest. We identify several contextual conditions, including limited participation, access to alternative sources of income and access to alternative career paths, and show how these tend to cushion the potential impact of precariousness. Yet, the fact that the workers in this example are school students, who will shortly exit this stage of the life course, is a powerful reminder of the need to incorporate a longitudinal dimension and a general account of labour restructuring into any analysis.

The example of secondary school students in part-time retail jobs is unusual, but the conceptual framework developed to analyse this example can be adapted to other experiences of precarious work, both in Australia and other countries. The analysis thereby opens up new paths for future research on the increasingly important topic of precariousness and precarious work.

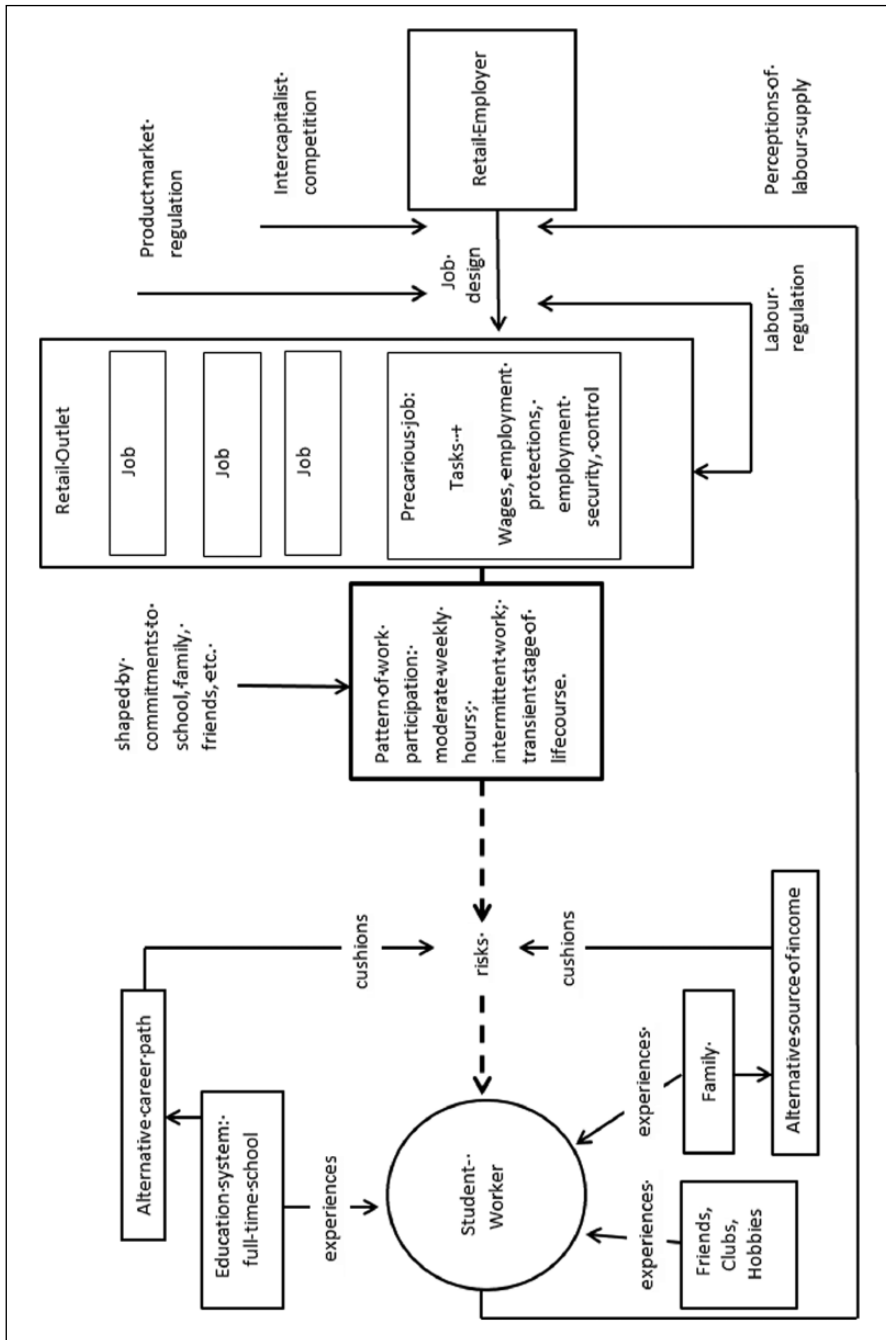


Figure 1. Precarious work and precarious workers: the case of school students.

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