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Beyond the vocational fragments: Creative work, precarious labour and the idea of 'Flexploitation'

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Abstract

The subjective experience of employment insecurity may be more contradictory than discourses of 'fragmentation' and 'flexploitation' suggest. For young people seeking careers in creative occupations, the expectation of insecure employment conditions has become normalised. This may be the combined effect of intergenerational changes in the youth labour market generally, and the nature of employment in creative industries at all career stages. The article draws from 80 life history interviews conducted in Western Sydney, Australia, a region with high concentrations of unemployment and low socio-economic status. Their perspectives problematise the common assumption that young creative workers seek to resist insecure patterns of work or long for the stable jobs of the past. Partly, they have accepted the injunction for 'vocational restlessness' in their industries. Both in their 'day jobs' and in their attempts to get into their chosen part of the creative industry, they feel that not staying in one position too long can be both liberating and adaptive. Union campaigns highlighting the perils of insecurity are unlikely to resonate with them.

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> *Casualisation profoundly affects the person who suffers it: by making the whole future uncertain it prevents all rational anticipation and, in particular, the basic belief and hope in the future that one needs in order to rebel, especially collectively, against present conditions, even the most intolerable.*
>
> *Pierre Bourdieu (1999: 82)*

> *… the young demonstrators have seen their parents' generation conform to the Fordist pattern of drab full-time jobs and subordination to industrial management … Though lacking a cohesive alternative agenda, they showed no desire to resurrect labourism.*
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> *Guy Standing (2009: 3) writing of the young European 'precariat' who participated in the Mayday protests in the mid 2000s.*

The tension between these two statements illustrates the social and psychological complexity associated with forms of precarious work that have emerged in the past 30 years. The flight of manufacturing capital from Australia and the rise of new industries, forms of work and social arrangements mean that young people are entering a very different labour market from that of their grandparents. While job security remains a key social justice demand, many young workers have internalised the injunction to vocational restlessness that is central to the discourses of 'new capitalism'. To these people, job security is synonymous with the repetitive drudgery and alienated labour that they associate with the sacrifices of their parents. We discuss the implications of research revealing a deep ambivalence towards the job-for-life, that was central to the male breadwinner models of class and masculinity prevailing in the social democratic era (Campbell et al., 2009). This ambivalence raises questions about whether the subjective experience of work that is insecure yet flexible can be defined unequivocally in terms such as 'fragmented futures' (Watson et al., 2003) or 'flexploitation' (Bourdieu, 1998; Ross, 2009).

The article draws on qualitative research with young people who aspired to work in the creative industries. The scope of these industries has expanded since the 1980s to become emblematic of a new Western economy in which the commercialisation of cultural products is presented as the basis of global competitiveness. Cultural work has long been characterised by insecurity, variable income and defiance of bourgeois convention, but never has it been so widely aspired to.[1] While income security is desirable, precarious work may be seen as a prevalent, and even essential, condition of participation in the creative work that young people perform, or aspire to perform.

The analysis begins with an overview of the industry and of insecure work within it. Scholarly accounts of labour market insecurity are then analysed, in order to draw out implications for young people embarking on creative industry careers. We briefly explain the life history methodology used and then explore three individual narratives (from a sample of 80). The purpose is precisely the opposite of generalisation: focused work like this has the ability to problematise broader sociological statements and

theories, facilitating more nuanced observations about the contradictions of individual adaptations. The conclusion outlines issues confronted by young working class people embarking on a creative career and asks how the union movement can speak to young people imbued with the 'reflexive individualism' of creative work in the 'new' economy.

Accounts of precarious and creative work

It seems well established that precarious employment is a growing trend throughout the Western world (Ross, 2009) and especially in Australia (Burgess et al., 2008). Watson et al. (2003: ch. 6) shows that 'churning' has become a structural feature of contemporary labour markets such that in their working lives, young people will have many more jobs than did their parents. Youth unemployment continues to be higher (for people aged 16–24 years) than among the general population, and as Table 1 illustrates, insecure employment is considerably more prevalent for young people than across the labour market as a whole (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2013a). In 2011, there was a very strong concentration of people aged 15–24 years in casual jobs (without paid leave entitlements), predominantly part time, reducing in the 25–29 age group as careers become established.

Across all age groups, however, high levels of insecurity continue to characterise creative industry jobs, as Table 2 suggests.[2] The employment type 'owner manager of unincorporated enterprise' covers fixed-term contracting, which, as well as casual work, is a notable feature of the creative industries. Gibson et al. (2002: 178) have showed that '[o]ver 45% of all work in culture and leisure sectors was of a short-term (13 weeks or less) or part-time nature (less than 10 hours per week)'. Throsby (2010) has noted a high variability in artistic earnings (p. 49) and comments, '[e]ven performing artists who in earlier times functioned as employees now tend to supply their labour under a lump-sum contract …' (p. 53).

Throsby and others (see McRobbie, 2002) have analysed 'portfolio careers' in creative occupations. Males, younger freelance artists and those not relying on a partner's income spent the most time in non-arts work, which ranged from hospitality work and taxi-driving to community-based projects and new applications of creative skills (Throsby, 2007; Throsby and Zednik, 2010). The notion of the portfolio career, divided between creative and other work, depends on what work is embraced by the terms 'cultural', 'creative' and 'artistic'. Increasingly, the terms cover not just the conception, creation and production of culture but also the manufacture and commercialisation of cultural products (Throsby, 2008; although Throsby omits technical workers completely from his sample). Advertising, design, film, video, television, radio, video and computer games, fashion and advertising were all among the creative industries identified by the UK Blair government's Department of Culture, Media and Sport as potentially important for global competitiveness and job creation (Throsby, 2008). Ferrándiz (2010) has emphasised a shift from 'cultural' to technology-based 'entertainment and creative' industries, involving experimentation, play and ephemerality.

Along with others, we have misgivings about the conceptual rigour/range of the term 'creative industries' (Clark, 2009) and with the assumptions about the promise/potential

Table 1. Types of employment by gender and selected age group, Australia 2011.

Employment type	Age group (years)			
	15–19	20–24	25–29	15–65+
Males				
Full time with paid leave entitlements	28%	57%	66%	58%
Full time without paid leave entitlements	9%	12%	12%	8%
Part time with paid leave entitlements	8%	6%	4%	4%
Part time without paid leave entitlements	54%	20%	7%	9%
Owner managers of incorporated enterprises	–	–	4%	9%
Owner managers of unincorporated enterprises	–	–	8%	13%
Total	322,900 100%	638,100 100%	742,200 100%	6,185,300 100%
Females				
Full time with paid leave entitlements	13%	46%	61%	43%
Full time without paid leave entitlements	5%	8%	7%	5%
Part time with paid leave entitlements	9%	13%	13%	21%
Part time without paid leave entitlements	72%	31%	14%	19%
Owner managers of incorporated enterprises	–	–	2%	4%
Owner managers of unincorporated enterprises	–	–	4%	8%
Total	350,800 100%	556,700 100%	608,800 100%	5,168,200 100%

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2013a).

they hold. Creativity and innovation have played a central role in the discourses of economic renewal in the West (Leadbeater, 2000; Ross, 2009). The view that intellectual property and the creative industries can provide economic salvation is reflected in various policy documents and statements from Paul Keating's Clever Country to Tony Blair's Cool Britannia, and it resonates with a counter-culture critique of standardisation/Taylorism. The so-called creative classes have become the coveted, elusive vanguard of the new economy and are particularly sought after by those engaged in efforts at urban renewal/regeneration (Florida, 2002). The idea of creative labour has a strong popular appeal, promising, as it does, a fulfilling marriage of art and work. Yet much work in creative industries is not creative at all (Clark, 2009). The creative career, like the

Table 2. Types of employment by gender – arts and recreation services, Australia 2011.

Employment type	Males		Females	
	Number (in 1000s)	%	Number (in 1000s)	%
Full time with paid leave entitlements	58.3	55	30.9	32
Full time without paid leave entitlements	6.5	6	7.7	8
Part time with paid leave entitlements	5.8	5	9.8	10
Part time without paid leave entitlements	20	19	34.2	35
Owner managers of incorporated enterprises	1.6	1	1.2	1
Owner managers of unincorporated enterprises	14.6	14	13.2	14
Total	106.8	100	97.1	100

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2013a, 2013b).

creative economy, is about immanent, unfulfilled potential. Whereas 30 years ago, the creative precariat (Standing, 2009) did not extend much beyond artists and musicians, now many more people live on the edge.

The growing importance of creative curriculum in Western educational systems has meant that increasing numbers of young people, including those from working class and minority backgrounds, are developing ambitions for creative careers (Morgan and Nelligan, 2012). As a background to exploring the degree of insecurity this entails, we examine narratives of social and individual precariousness, questioning some of the more hyperbolic suggestions of inevitability.

Accounts of precarious and creative lives

There is now a solid literature that links the growth in precarious employment to employers' search for workforce flexibility (Burgess et al., 2008; Campbell, 2010). This is often understood in terms of shifts in capitalism on a global scale. A decline in Fordist mass production, especially in advanced economies, has been accompanied by the growth of 'fast capitalism' (Gee et al., 1996). With drastically reduced fixed costs, smaller firms engage in more tailored types of production involving rapid adaption to change and differentiated demand. In knowledge-, creative- and technology-based employment, precarious employment is (and long has been) more prevalent, and in some accounts, inevitable, as employers adopt a strategic 'short-termism', involving greater levels of outsourcing/subcontracting. For example, where formerly studio employees produced films, now much of this work is outsourced to a range of creative workers (Christopherson, 2009), with most being contracted only for the duration of the services they provide (Blair, 2003). Therefore, in several of the creative industries, work has become more project-based, thus fragmenting working lives. Although precariousness has long been

part of creative work, the growth in numbers enrolled in creative training courses (and the decreased costs of new technologies) has opened up the possibility for entry into the field (Florida, 2002; Leadbeater, 2000). There are few effective constraints on workforce entry – such as those that operate in older professions where hard barriers can only be surmounted through credentials – and this creates an oversupply of labour. Atomised freelancers are forced to face the risks of creative employment individually. The lack of stable workplaces works against union membership, despite it being increasingly important to worker protection (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011).

Such changes have been described in terms of the emergence of the 'risk society', 'reflexive modernity' and 'calculative individualism'. Beck (1992) has argued that with the rise of the 'risk society', once solid social institutions have been eroded, so that increasing levels of uncertainty and personal responsibility characterise aspects of everyday life. In some fundamental but largely undocumented way, the institutions of society have 'handed back' the management of risk to the individual. This is both a blessing and a curse. Beck claims that collective allegiances have diminished and individualism has come to guide social action (see also Giddens, 1991). The old safety net of social structures (especially, the modern welfare state, the nuclear family and the labour movement) cedes to a more uncertain and competitive milieu. The idea that people must secure their position for themselves and their families now seems hegemonic.

This contemporary 'liquid' modernity (Bauman, 2000) is characterised by much greater uncertainty as to how to establish, fix and reproduce a social identity. The late-modern project of building a 'reflexive self' (Beck, 2000; Beck et al., 1994) breaks through the old order where 'everyone knew their place'. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) claim that the 'new worker' now faces a challenge to articulate 'choice biographies', compiling 'portfolio narratives' and parlaying diverse experiences into coherent career accounts (Connell and Burgess, 2006; Dwyer et al., 2001; Morgan, 2006). Young people are told that credentials are essential to vocational success and yet even the best education provides no guarantees. The passage from youth to adulthood has become increasingly problematic, and the idea of education and work as marking out discrete, stable and sequential phases of life is obsolete: education is a lifelong imperative and unemployment a constant threat (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001). Workers are told they need to be occupationally agile and must abandon the collectivism of the past for the neo-liberal individualism of the future (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). What is valued in the new economy is, in Sennett's (2006) words, 'a self oriented to the short term, focused on potential ability, willing to abandon past experience' (p. 5).

If risk and uncertainty are omnipresent, then how are people to plan and consolidate? For young people from immigrant and working class backgrounds and/or where parents have experienced extended periods of unemployment, generational disjunction is a risk. Families/communities may no longer provide the road maps required for working life. One response from social theorists (Landry, 2000; Leadbeater, 2000) is to embrace this and to celebrate rootlessness. Leadbeater (2000) writes,

> My father had a steady, predictable career which carried him through to a well earned, properly funded and enjoyable retirement … I am not yet forty, I have already had several mini-careers … I am one of Charles Handy's portfolio workers … I live on my wits. (p. 1)

These sentiments have a normative tenor. Leadbeater, in embracing individualisation, urges others to do so. However, an increasing body of literature charts the inequalities faced by young people in the new economy (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001; Kenway et al., 2006; MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007; Nayak, 2009; Skeggs, 2004). These writers argue that it is harder for working class people to adjust to the 'new economy' and see the experience of casual and temporary employment in low-paid occupations as corroding life prospects. People in their middle age are deprived of the economic security (including through home ownership) that was more available to workers in the mid-20th century (Masterman-Smith and Pocock, 2008). In addition, there has been a structural erosion of the sorts of work-based solidarities and enduring social and ethical values associated with long-term immersion in work-based communities of practice (Sennett, 1998, 2001, 2006).

The quotation from Bourdieu introducing this article claims that insecure work relationships are so isolating as to render resistance (especially collective resistance) inconceivable. Bourdieu (1998) sees such disempowerment as 'flexploitation', a psychological strategy used by employers, which he defines as

> a mode of domination of a new kind, based on the creation of a generalised and permanent state of insecurity aimed at forcing workers into submission, into the acceptance of exploitation. (p. 85)

This 'orchestration of uncertainty' has been illustrated well in an ethnographic account of working for a day labour agency, (Purser, 2006: 16). It may also be applied to the 'prolongation of youth' described in Ortega's (2003) study of precarious work and life among Spanish young people. But it denies individual as well as collective agency. For many young people, a more nuanced account is needed. Bradley (2009), for example, while recognising the existence of flexploitation, found that many young workers reported being able to negotiate their preferred hours and had 'internalised flexibility': they welcomed the prospect of variety and had a 'strong sense of individual responsibility for their own labour market success', despite objective evidence that they faced insecure futures (p. 94).

We are hesitant to use generational contrasts to understand youth transitions and aware that it is a rather schematic concept and not one that can be relied upon to mark out clear and discrete epochs. If economic reforms that re-structured the labour market began in the 1980s, it is therefore the case that the parents of the youthful cohort we are considering have themselves lived through the era of increasingly precarious work. However, young people entering the labour market in the 2000s have had no direct experience of the Fordist era and, arguably, encounter working life with lower expectations of job security, especially early in their working lives. The conventional wisdom of the new vocationalism suggests that workers, in general, need to blow with the winds of change, to be prepared to re-skill and reinvent themselves. However, where an occupation is coloured with the patina of creativity, greater sacrifice is required: (1) a preparedness to do unpaid work in one's creative field, (2) willingness to subsidise creative ambition by working in (what are widely perceived as) mundane service sector jobs and (3) willingness to organisation of leisure time and friendships around the 'networking' imperative. This produces the potential for existential contradictions – on the one hand, their creative

callings become a very visible badge of self (as precarious industries encourage/require self-promotion), on the other hand, a reliance on alternative income sources (the day job) renders that claim fragile.

The study and its method

To draw out these contradictions and ambiguities, the analysis that follows is based on a larger project using qualitative inquiry and interpretation. Our research aims to understand how precarious labour affects young people, not just as workers, but more generally as social subjects; how it steers people towards individualism or collectivism; and how it structures and affects their sense of agency/individual sovereignty. How does the experience and prospect of precariousness shape social bonds – both residual and emergent – and how does it direct decisions and dispositions in working life and beyond. We interviewed young people with creative aspirations from a variety of backgrounds.

Life history methods have allowed researchers to explore the meaning that individuals bring to life experiences, in particular of poverty, oppression and exclusion (Bertaux, 1981). Data analysis involves an ongoing search for meanings, relationships and points of tension, constantly reassessing and refining concepts. Key phrases are located within self-stories, interpreted and cross-referenced to participants' interpretations if possible, with tentative conclusions being refined as the research progresses. Janesick (2003) calls this a process of crystallisation – recognition of the multiple facets of a phenomenon – the opposite of the commonly used technique of triangulation, which arrives at a singular interpretation by comparing several perspectives.

Our interviews with young people were designed to examine their narratives of self and career and to see whether they resonate with the emerging theories around precarity. We conducted single interviews with around 80 young people who are enrolled in, or have recently completed, post-school courses in creative skills (mainly, music, design and film/video), most from working class/minorities. We also undertook some limited participant observation of creative arts teaching and learning, both formal and informal. Our aim was to consider the inherited cultural forms/templates that shape vocational 'narratives of aspiration'. What sorts of values and dispositions did the research subjects bring to life and work? Did they embrace the short-termism and individualism of precarious work and, if so, in what sense? How negotiable were their craft identities and how transferable were their skills? How did they survive vocational/income insecurity?

Young people, creative work and insecurity: Three narratives

Roger

Roger, in his mid-20s, still lives with his parents, a convenient and cheap option. Easygoing and confident, he enjoys talking of his life. He has had a number of successes – for example, an event management company with his friend – and he seems confident that others will come along. His creative ambitions are to do with music. His hip-hop band

has never 'made it', but this does not appear to worry Roger. He sees himself as playing the long game and, in career terms, as keeping his options open.

Roger's 'portfolio career' also includes retail work. While at school, he obtained work with a DIY chain, progressing to front of store work and, eventually, to deputy section manager. He has worked there – off and on – for nearly a decade. This is itself unusual in retail. At least for the sorts of time scales Roger is calculating over, the large chain store provides stable backstop employment. Inverting the old Fordist-worker contract, with the worker reproducing himself or herself ready to be called up, Roger expects the DIY chain to welcome him back whenever he is ready to return after periods of absence. He has skills and, importantly, experience. This reduces the company's training and recruitment costs. He can pick up where he left off with no extra training. Part of this strategy has been not to cut all ties when at one point he left the firm:

> So when I left there I didn't quit … officially I was just still casual so I was still on the books, [I went for] this other job, stayed on the books, once I knew I was not liking it I called up [the DIY chain] and got more hours there …

Of course there are trade-offs. It may not be possible to come back at the same level or with the same guaranteed number of paid hours. Roger does not care much about these marginal differences in pay, and so far, he seems to have avoided most of the traps. Still, it is a competitive labour market there as well, and he has to be aware that there are other young unemployed workers waiting for a start.

The chain store also offers a relaxed working environment, without rigid dress codes and priding themselves on embracing cultural diversity. Roger likes the easy-going shop floor culture that encourages him to take more responsibility, and with co-workers who have the same 'vibe'. So he can be loyal to them and to his idea that 'everyone knows it is all bullshit'. In other words, he can do the job mostly in a way that he is happy with without feeling that he has to 'sell out' to get on. Here is how Roger talks about the job and his co-workers:

> Obviously your appearance isn't a huge thing as long as you get in there do your job and pretty much do everything as required. The people there are a lot cooler I get on with them a lot better, I know what I am doing down there, it is a lot more comfortable there I know where I am at, everyone is good, close to home, and again it is a lot more flexible, if I need time off to do a show I can do it.

Roger considered undertaking a trade apprenticeship, but in his mid-20s, he feels he is 'past that'. The job allows him to feel part of the world of manual labour in that he is servicing the needs of both tradespeople and weekend handymen/women. Roger seems to be working with another job criterion. He thinks of himself as an active, sporty person who likes to move around and would not enjoy being 'stuck behind a desk':

> I am more of an active person either sport, music, more of a hands-on – doing your whole tradie type of career. Obviously if you don't start that when you are kind of 16 or 17 you have kind of wasted the opportunity, because who wants to go back to eight dollars an hour when you are 23 so the whole tradesman kind of apprenticeship thing doesn't really work kind of once you get past that.

Although his father's job was stable and sedentary, he is thankful that his working life will not be like that. The accounts of several of our interviewees suggest that precarity and unreconstructed Fordism are not stark alternatives. Because modern work is being re-structured by precarious relations, this does not mean the desired 'opposite' would be a return to the Fordism, a fate as deadening to Roger as sitting behind a computer. Such jobs would not suit his trademark individuality, style and personal autonomy: to be a '9 to 5er' would potentially signal the death of his artistic and rebellious self. He shares a view commonly expressed by others in our sample that no artist/creative worker could, without irony, take a routine job seriously.

As with any snapshot of a life, there are some caveats. One factor is chronology and age. New economy careers may not be linear, but they are successive. How else would the category of 'experience' work? To meaningfully claim, experience takes time. Psychological notions of maturity are less relevant, but Roger cannot be 'in his twenties' forever. People do tend to periodise their lives and feel the parallax when they see others 'left behind' or 'passing them'. It would be interesting to interview Roger in mid-life.

Roger is not a 'victim' of an unstoppable and wholly negative set of historical and social evolutions. He is sanguine. His ease with his situation, and his apparent confidence that he can always make it work for him, may be hubristic, or just 'learned optimism'. Either way, it would be inaccurate to describe Roger as merely put upon. Precarity is real enough for an increasing number of people, but some theoretical conceptualisations of it are too overarching. Social structure is not just an iron cage. There has to be a space for agency. Roger and others in our sample are purposive and have taken stock of the relations and structures within which they can navigate.

Hayley

Hayley grew up near Penrith, a working class suburb in Sydney's outer west. She went to her local high school, completed year 12 and then worked in shops and offices. Hayley's parents did not pressure her to find secure work; rather, she was encouraged to find her calling:

> I've always gone with the flow and mum's always just been, 'do whatever you like, whatever makes you happy', and dad's kinda chilled like that too.

However, by her mid-20s, she was being encouraged to study for a degree:

> Mum gave me the application form and said, 'c'mon, do something'.

She studied media/communications and now has three insecure jobs: university tutor, freelance filmmaker and director's assistant with a public television station, which resulted from her spell there as an unpaid intern. During her internship, she sought to differentiate herself from the other interns. She ingratiated herself with managers, worked extra hours without pay and was then offered paid but precarious work.

In her late 20s, like Roger, she still lives at home with her parents, an arrangement that allows her to endure 'precarity'. Teaching is contract-based, and the director's

assistant position is casual. Hayley suggests there was an opportunity for her to obtain more secure employment with the television station but was strangely ambivalent about this:

> … I had that moment, working [at the television station] and making all the film stuff where I thought my gosh maybe this is what I'm meant to do and now I'm like I don't know … wouldn't like to work [there] full-time, don't want to end up like one of those sour people that work there … wouldn't want to work in TV unless I was making the show, directing the show, hosting the show like an independent sort of project. … and not my equal colleagues but my bosses [there] have been good to me and it's not often that I burn a bridge … and by working with people in the industry I get industry recognition so I don't completely want to let them go … and they said they'd always have work for me … and with my job you have to use it or lose it so I have to go back …

Hayley expresses a view of her working life as restless, dynamic and unfolding, involving self-actualisation, more than just earning a living. As McRobbie (2002) says, 'it incorporates and takes over everyday life', it 'supplants, indeed hijacks the social', detaching people 'from more settled … socially rooted ways' (p. 99). Leadbeater (2000) sees the quest for enduring work relations, as based on the longing for a 'closed, nostalgic communitarian society', and as killing off innovation (pp. ix–xi). For Hayley, the choice of whether to persevere with precarious work or commit to more permanent, full-time employment is a difficult one. Settled employment provides a stable income and work patterns, but binds her both to a single occupation and workplace community that she may outgrow. To embrace stability is to relinquish a degree of vocational sovereignty: the ability to steer her career and (as she tells it) enrich her stock of human capital.

Hayley is an expert networker. Social networks are a key organisational force of creative industries workforces (Blair, 2001, 2003, 2009; Christopherson, 2008, 2009). Networks need to be maintained and replenished and rely on the mobility and opportunism of their members. Blair (2009) suggests that redundant contacts should fall away and be replaced by others that generate social ties and employment opportunities. Contacts, in a networked society, are a form of social capital and should be replenished and transcended regularly. For people like Hayley, 'life's a pitch' (Gill, 2010): every social interaction should be an opportunity to network. By staying in one place, Hayley risks reducing the effectiveness of her networks.

The diminishing numbers of those employed on a full-time basis in the television industry are expected to engage in task repetition and teamwork, things which run counter to Hayley's vocational inclinations. From the point of view of neo-liberal vocational discourse, such workplaces disrupt self-actualisation and the production of a portfolio career. Hayley suggests that the 'job for life' can be stultifying and embittering. She wishes to avoid becoming 'one of those sour people', too long in a single job. This qualifies Sennett's (1998) claim that the enduring bonds of loyalty to fellow workers are the foundations of fulfilment and that the impermanency of 'flexible capitalism' corrodes people's characters and their ability to connect with others. The existential condition of the flexible, restless postmodern worker, that Hayley so clearly exemplifies, suggests that exactly the opposite is true.

By virtue of the route she took to enter television work, Hayley also recognises that full-time work also means being submissive to the paternalistic authority and power that gave her the break, that she will remain the protégé of decision-makers. In this role, she will never attain the vocational autonomy/sovereignty that she craves and that she perceives as the norm. However, this is complicated by feelings of obligation. She says that her bosses were 'good' to her, suggesting that she owes them a debt, despite undertaking the internship and working for free. This makes it difficult for her to sever the relationship completely. Hayley is also bound to the television station because, in creative labour markets, reputation and social capital matter. If she supersedes the workplace-based network, she may compromise one opportunity for another and one social connection for a potential other. Therefore, she does not completely 'burn her bridges', but neither does she commit to full-time work.

Tanja

Tanja, in her mid-20s, a confident young woman, grew up in a working class area of southwestern Sydney. A talented dancer at school, she was offered the chance to teach young children her skills. She describes this break as serendipitous, a narrative trope that cropped up several times during the interview:

> I didn't even want to be a dance teacher, it just fell in my lap, I just got offered a job I was fifteen and they said we will pay you thirty bucks an hour and I thought wow I can be rich, that is a lot of money when you are fifteen.

After completing school, she had some interest in becoming a primary school teacher, like her mother, a second-generation Italian migrant, but heard from a cousin who was working for a company that staged shows in Australian Fashion Week that a job had become vacant. She decided to put other ambitions on hold, applied and was offered the job:

> [A] lot of opportunities seem to fall in my lap, touch wood, so if something comes along like that I don't I am not the sort of person to say 'oh no no I am doing this', I will just take it. That is why I have done so many things … you never know what is around the corner and what if you don't dip your toe [in].

This is typical of the language of magical opportunity that we heard often from young people who have enjoyed a measure of success. She explains her variegated career as a consequence of things just falling 'in her lap'. Dipping a toe in the water is a metaphor implying openness to experience. This is very different from the strategic career building subject and is more akin to the ideal of the flexible, malleable worker with transferable skills and pathways that are negotiable and contingent.

For a time, Tanja was excited by the prospect of working in fashion and sought advice from more experienced co-workers on how to build a career. They advised her,

> 'Don't stick around because you need to meet new people' and it is all that social networking especially in the fashion industry … so the more you are out and about and you are changing

jobs … the more people you are meeting, and the more networking you are doing and the bigger jobs you can land. But the jobs only go for a specific amount of time.

She learnt that in order to be successful, the new worker has to embrace precariousness. In some industries, there is even a formula. Another interviewee, a young recruit to new media/advertising, indicated that 3 years is widely accepted as the right length of time to remain in one job: not too short so future employers suspect that you are flighty and unreliable, or that you were released by a previous employer once they became aware that your skills and performance were inadequate, but not too long so that you become 'stale' and taken for granted.

After working in the position for 2 years, Tanja decided that the prospect of compulsory vocational restlessness was not to her liking. She also became aware that people employed in positions similar to her own were almost exclusively young. This sharpened the sense of having a short shelf life:

> I think working in the fashion industry it has just really it is not very secure and there is a lot of it is a young job, like a lot of young people, like once you are in your thirties if you don't own your own little company you are not really sort of [secure].

She recognised that successful people in the fashion industry were entrepreneurial and embraced the challenge of networking and self-promotion. Tanja had little desire to emulate them. Additionally, she became aware of the informal cultural judgments and networks of class-based patronage that operated to limit the chances of someone like her, from a modest family background:

> … a lot of the girls didn't know where you were from but they could tell where you were, like they had their expensive … Louis Vuitton bags and that sort of thing and … I didn't wear any label sort of clothing.

These experiences were sobering. Tanja felt unable to assimilate to the competitive individualism of the fashion world, and so revived her earlier ambition and enrolled in a teacher education course, seeking a point of anchorage against a tendency to become captivated by every sparkling opportunity that presented itself. Teaching would give her some control over her working life, the chance to avoid the fate of a fragmented and disparate precarious career. Far from being the sovereign, strategic and versatile new economy worker, Tanja characterised herself as easily wooed by the flattery of serendipitous opportunity, using the vocabulary of the romance narrative:

> I need something that is a little bit more stable I think, because I just get swept off … on a tangent and fall in love with something else …

However, she also presented her impulsiveness as a virtue. These qualities, she suggested, give her the disposition to be a versatile teacher, to bring a range of skills that will give her a role beyond the classroom:

> I want to be involved in a lot of things within the school because just being a teacher in the classroom would drive me insane, like I need to be doing different things like organising you

know the dance, or you know running cross country or I need to be doing different things all the time.

Discussion – Strategies for precarious labour

In these three cases, as in our wider sample, we find subjective complexity associated with precarious work. Most interviewees, far from seeing insecure creative employment as perverse, accepted it as endemic to the creative industries, tacitly acknowledging insecurity as a condition of youthful working life. Like most young Australians, most interviewees had experienced job insecurity while working in retail and hospitality. This may have habituated them to relations that operate in creative fields, where work is scarce and the power of gatekeepers is often arbitrarily exercised.

Our young interviewees expressed complex notions of agency. The narratives of Hayley and Tanja were filled with magical happenstance, while Roger was much cooler about the idea of the big break. The young women expressed excitement at being the beneficiaries of opportunity, but far from passively waiting to be discovered, they were actively seeking to capitalise on those opportunities. However, they were not rigidly strategic either, seeking to engineer a career around a set of predetermined goals. In many ways, the eagerness for variety and vocational discovery, the sense of being versatile and open to possibilities, made them ideal subjects of the new economy.

Hayley's narrative describes the role of protégé, the one who seeks mentorship and initiation to the secrets of the craft/vocation. In contrast with the figure of the apprentice, whose skills were forged in stable Fordist work groups, the creative protégé works amidst instability and hierarchy, living or dying by patronage and informal judgment, tied to those who pursue managerial/entrepreneurial goals and vulnerable to the capricious withdrawal of mentorship. In contrast, the master–apprentice relationship, although unequal, nevertheless produces bonds that are independent of, and often counterposed to, managerial power and which emerged historically in stable communities of practice with traditions of craft-based independence. Hayley's tension with the long-term employees, over whose heads she was promoted, represents the contradictions faced by the creative protégé, disinclined towards workplace solidarity and exhibiting the patterns of restlessness and self-renewal of the postmodern career.

While eager to capitalise on the breaks that came her way, Tanja was not prepared to play the role of protégé. She was unfamiliar with the informal codes on which much career advancement in her field is based:

I didn't know what to expect in fashion like I had to go out there on my own wing and do it.

She refused to dress/present herself according to the styles of others in the fashion industry or to kowtow to her boss. As a result, she became involved in conflict:

I had clashes with my boss … I just started to give her attitude and I wouldn't finish doing bits and pieces of my job and would talk back … I would get told, 'well you can't say no to her you are bottom of the rank'.

The decision to resign the job and commence an education degree reflected Tanja's aversion to the cut-throat individualism she saw operating in the creative workplace. Although craving the stability of a familiar career – modelled on her mother – this was not just to escape precariousness, but because she felt she lacks the ambition required for a creative career:

> I think I will always have a creative flair from my parents and from my passion for the creative arts but I don't see myself excelling in that field, I don't think I am that top notch person that really wants to strive.

Roger's attitude towards work and career shows more signs of being modelled on the tradition of worker independence based on (largely masculine) Fordist communities of practice (of which a band could be seen as a surrogate). The job in the hardware store was sufficiently flexible to shrink and expand according to the waxing and waning of his musical career. His ironic distance from the corporate culture/big retail and his fondness for workplace informality echoed the traditional blue-collar/white-collar manual/mental divide. He was able to use practical manual skills in dealing with customers, suggesting analogies between the hardware store and the factory floor. Unlike Hayley and Tanja, he did not describe his creative musical exploits in the vocabulary of fate and serendipity, but rather appears more instrumentally disposed. The women in our sample generally embraced the role of protégé more readily, whereas the men were less inclined to accept mentorship from those who exercise corporate power and leverage in the creative industries.

Conclusion

We have argued against the notion that young people who have creative vocational aspirations will always resist intermittent and unorthodox forms of employment in the creative industries and that their ambition is to become primary full-time employees. Most creative aspirants accept that their chosen fields are inherently precarious and this presents certain advantages. To some extent, the acceptance of the condition of vocational restlessness can be read as a reaction against the popular memory of Fordism, of imprisonment in a job-for-life. However, it is also based on the idea that a creative career is synonymous with youth and that job insecurity is intrinsic to this phase of life. It is also synonymous with the idea that the shape and direction of the career is vague and unforeseeable and that the creative aspirant should be open to diverse possibilities and happenstance.

We can accept that vocational identities and aspirations are part of a larger project of self and are formed by influences wider than just those encountered through formal education and employment. However, there is still a very strong social inference (originally more from middle class cultural norms) that paid work defines you. The majority of our sample had a 'half in/half out' relationship to their creative field. Although this was a feature one might have expected given high rates of attrition in creative industries, more attention needs to be paid to this ambivalence. Hayley, Roger and Tanja dealt in different ways with the realisation that the creative job was hard to sustain as a sole focus of their

lives. Throsby's (2010) survey demonstrates that even mature and established artists tend to supplement their income with other work.

The concern then is how to make the transition from youthful exploration of creative career opportunities, combined with other insecure and unsatisfying jobs, to a more established career in which flexibility and multiple job holding are not synonymous with fragmentation or 'flexploitation' and fragmentation. We have noted that the youthful protégé is a key discursive figure of the creative industries. But as we have seen, in the volatile and ephemeral work situations in these fields, the favour and mentorship of those in power are fragile and conditional, and based upon power relations that can undermine solidarity and trust with co-workers. If the job is precarious, it is likely to be viewed only as a stepping stone to the next thing. Each of the interviewees described different strategies in response to these conditions. Hayley's individualistic orientation gave her a break, but at the cost of separating her from co-workers. Tanja was in the end not prepared to play the games required to progress in the fashion industry and opted for a less competitive career in education, while trying to cling to her creative self. Roger had little inclination to be a protégé and was less sanguine about a magical break, using his day job to hedge against the strong possibility that his creative career would not come to fruition.

More qualitative longitudinal research is needed into the evolution of creative aspirations and how they are affected by both the structures of feeling in an age of precarity and the specifics of individual adaptations to, and within, particular creative industries. There is evidence of growing institutional support for those in the situation of creative precarity. Industry training bodies have called for this training to include skills in the skills needed to forge a creative industry career – such as communication, business and career management and customer relations (Throsby, 2010). The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA, 2012) has been reaching out beyond its traditional membership to provide networking and business advice and services to freelancers. These initiatives suggest that the prospects for community and collectivity are not necessarily as hopeless as the 'corrosion' and 'flexploitation' literatures suggest. Our work points to the need for a more nuanced understanding of the complexities associated with precariousness and suggests the need for a more specific and differentiated vocabulary in trade union campaigns against employment insecurity (including the current Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU, 2013) campaign 'Secure Jobs. Better Future'). This involves recognising that insecure work is not the same as insecure jobs, and that when forming vocational aspirations, young people may be open to a greater degree of uncertainty and unforseeability than has hitherto been acknowledged.

Funding

Notes

1. Approximately 40,000 Australians a year are enrolled in vocational courses in the creative arts, with approximately 8000 completions a year (Innovation and Business Skills Australia (IBSA), 2012: 22, 24).

2.   The industry classification reflected in Table 2 does not include the wider definition, embracing fields such as cultural heritage management. The 2006 census identified 345,950 people as being employed in the cultural industries and 287,791 as employed in cultural occupations (3.8% and 1% respectively of the Australian workforce; IBSA, 2012: 6).

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