The Same Only Different:
Precarious Workers' Perceptions of their Treatment in
Covid-19 Times

The last three decades have witnessed major changes in employment patterns, but especially in advanced capitalist societies such as Britain (Green *et al.,* 2016). At the forefront of these changes has been the acceleration in the growth of the variety of unstable and insecure types of work, of which is commonly characterised as precarious work. Defined as "employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker" (Kalleberg, 2009, p.2), such work is distinguished by the ways in which the fundamental risks of work and employment are transferred to the worker while the employer retains all control over the worker and the work performed (Hewison, 2016). Although some of the features of precarious work are not new and can be traced to longstanding discourses on human resource management, work and employment (Webster *et al*., 2008), there is an increasing tendency for organizations to adopt this approach as their preferred mode of organizing.

The increase in the appeal of precarious work to organizations has consequently been the subject of critical academic and practitioner scrutiny. Specifically, scholars have explored the ways in which such approaches to organizing work complement and extend previously theorised understandings of the exploitation of workers (Quinlan, 2012). Research contributions have also linked precarious work to labour market liberalisation and economic prosperity (Bolton *et al.,* 2012). However, interestingly, the pandemic has introduced novel underlying forces which could present different and complicating dynamics for human resource management, especially in understanding precarious work and those who undertake such jobs.

The impacts of COVID-19 on precarious workers have been immense and have been accentuated by the inherent characteristics of the virus which led to unprecedented policy responses, many of which have been particularly damaging to workers in insecure employment (Brammer *et al.,* 2023); imposing devastating restrictions impacting precarious workers (Bhandari *et al.,* 2021). Added to these is the relatively economically-disadvantaged position of precarious workers which further increased their vulnerability (Ogbonna, 2020). The content and context of precarious work are thus such that COVID-19 impacted workers in such employment disproportionately, with implications that are potentially profound for understanding the dynamic forces in this approach to contemporary work and employment (ILO, 2020). In these regards, the pandemic offered interesting research opportunities

to develop insights into work and employment in ways that are similar to other transformational events (Blustein *et al.,* 2020).

However, although the services of precarious workers were positioned at the forefront of many organizational responses to the pandemic, it is interesting that few investigations explored the impacts of the pandemic on precarious workers from the perspective of such workers across the different phases of the pandemic. Scholars have investigated the ways in which the pandemic extended labour market inequality (Fana *et al.,* 2020), and on the increased hazards for precarious workers (Loustaunau *et al.,* 2020). However, despite the growing recognition of the importance of employee voice (Loi and Zhenyao, 2023), few contributions have given voice to the workers with the least stake in organizations who were nonetheless required to work. An understanding of the experiences and journeys of these workers is crucial in chronicling the dynamics of precarious work relationships during the shocks induced by the pandemic, and in exploring changes that may have been triggered or exacerbated by COVID-19. This article reports the findings of a longitudinal study of the reflections and interpretations of precarious workers on the impacts of the pandemic on their relationships with their employing organizations. Specifically, our focus is on whether precarious workers perceived the pandemic as contributing to an improvement in their working lives or whether they saw this as exacerbating their already theorised disadvantages in the labour market.

Literature Review

Kalleberg and Vallas (2018) trace the theoretical underpinnings of precarious work suggest that the political context in which such work is analysed helps to shape the way(s) it is understood. They note the intricate role of precarious work in maintaining neoliberalism, but they also argue that the uncertainties inherent in neoliberalism are translated to precarious modes of organizing in ways that provide both important sources of capital accumulation *and* control over labour (Butler, 2015; Ikeler, 2019). A surprising element of the literature is that there is no agreement on how such work should be distinguished (Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018; Kreshpaj *et al.,* 2020). While it is outside the scope of this review to elaborate this lack of consensus, three observations frame the background of this study.

First is that existing conceptualisations of precarious work tend to focus on employment contracts as a primary measure of precarity. That is, scholars commonly assess jobs as precarious on the evidence of the employment contract, including factors such as job title, hours of work, and so on. Tompa *et al.* (2017) suggests that other non-contractual features of a job can be just as significant in experiences of precarity. In this regard, many approaches adopted by scholars in studying workforce precarity may hide the multitude of job types which may, on the surface, appear as 'regular employment' but which embody precarity (Tompa, *et al.,* 2017).

Second is that research opinion are divided on whether precarious work is the dominant form of contemporary work. Indeed, HRM scholars have questioned the significance and pervasiveness of contemporary workforce precarity. Fevre (2017) provides such a critique and argues that pronouncement of the ubiquity of this phenomenon are matched by empirical evidence. This suggests that advocates of a long-term trend in workforce precarity and insecurity have made assumptions that have not been subjected to scrutiny (Doogan, 2005). In contrast, critics argue that scholars who question the ubiquity of workforce precarity commonly conflate employment types which are viewed as different from precarious work (Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018).

Third is that the lack of consensus on the meaning of precarious work has resulted in a tendency for scholars to adopt wide categorisations (Wilson and Ebert, 2013; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018). In this regard, the description 'precarious workers' can become a misnomer in that it can imply an ongoing work arrangement in which the worker retains an element of choice. Such associations, belie the realities of precarious work, wherein those involved often experience the highest levels of unpredictability (Kalleberg, 2009). Tompa *et al.* (2017) similarly link the value judgement of scholars to the context of the judgement. This suggests that the description 'workers in precarious employment' offers a more appropriate depiction (Ikeler, 2019). This also emphasises the omnipotence of the worker disadvantaging features which Loustaunau *et al.* (2021, p.5) referred to as 'precarious stability' in a way that stresses precarity as the only stable element of the work.

Notwithstanding the lack of agreement on the definition of precarious work, the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new dimensions which further compound these concerns for the workers

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concerned and for those people who are responsible for managing this human resource. Cubrich (2020) suggests that COVID-19 introduced additional and even more profound obstacles for precarious workers to navigate, with examples of such workers experiencing even more heightened abuse, financial hardship and insecurity. Allan and Blustein (2022) study precarious work and workplace dignity and argues that workforce precarity is a major predictor of job loss and is also associated with lower levels of fulfilment of survival and dignity needs of those that remained in work.

Overall, the brief review of literature on precarious work demonstrates that there is significant research interest on the topic. However, the review also points to lack of agreement on the definition of precarious work (Wilson and Ebert, 2013; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018) as well as on the extent to which such mode of organizing has become common (Fevre, 2017). It is commonly argued that a key limitation in HRM research is the marginalisation of the voice of employees, especially those in non-traditional fragmented roles (see Harris and Ogbonna, 2013). In this regard, the relative overlook of the perceptions of precarious workers in studies of the impacts of COVID-19 is an important issue that is worthy of additional inquiry. Existing studies have commonly either been general accounts of the economic-social hardships or have typically been accounts of workers at one point or during the early phase of the pandemic (Loustaunau *et al.* 2020; Allan and Blustein, 2022). Research contributions that explore the perceptions of precarious workers across the different phases of the pandemic are particularly needed to develop a richer understanding of the dynamics of coronavirus induced relationships in precarious work.

RESEARCH METHODS

Our core aim was to explore the perceptions of precarious workers on the ways in which the pandemic impacted their relationships with their employing organizations and to explore the ways in which they viewed the pandemic as (re)shaping the dynamics of precarious work and the extent to which they saw the pandemic as contributing to substantive improvement in their working lives or whether the pandemic is exacerbating their marginalisation.

Research Design

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Our research design centred on a two-phase data collection approach which were intended to gather data at (1) an initial phase where unprecedented societal lockdowns (with varying levels of restrictions were imposed) which (with hindsight) can be viewed as the 'height' of the pandemic which we described as the 'Lockdown phase' (April-September 2020) and (2) a later phase of data collection when it was anticipated that lockdown restrictions would be eased. This phase emerged in mid 2022 (with data collection between April-September 2022) where the pandemic rules were eased but elements of risk remained. We labelled this second period as the 'New Normal phase'. Ex-post interviews (post phase two) with a small sample of participants supported the distinction between the two phases while ex-post interviews with colleagues gauging coding procedures (post phase two) supported this labelling. Our approach is interpretivist in nature, which reflects our constructivist epistemological and ontological perspectives (see Denzin 1988) and we adopted an approach akin to grounded theory in an exploratory research design and utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the most apposite method of data collection.

Lockdown Data Collection and Participants

In the UK the first national lockdown was announced on 23rd March 2020. This first lockdown was incrementally lifted beginning 11th May 2020 as the four governments of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) imposed regional variations of lockdown. Similar but less stringent lockdowns were also order in late 2020 and early 2021 as infections increased. During the Lockdown Phase (Phase 1) we undertook 56 in-depth interviews with precarious workers. Data were collected between April-September 2020 during which the UK was under varying degrees of lockdown. Lockdown rules differed across regions, but all entailed some level of social isolation, travel restrictions, full or partial stay-at-home orders, and limited activity outside of homes.

Data collection during an often-confusing array of lockdown regulations, that varied considerably, was extremely challenging for the research team. In order to comply with the research ethics requirements of our Universities, data were collected exclusively via video links or (toward the end of data collection) via socially distant conditions. On average, the mean interview time was 67 minutes. Interviews began with an explicit

confirmation regarding the confidentiality of data collection, reaffirming written details sent earlier.

Data was collected via a sample of precarious workers who responded to online advertisements for a study of individuals whose current work was precarious. Criteria for inclusion included participants self-identification of their position regarding work and income as 'precarious'. Of 168 initial contacts, 48 were excluded as their employment could not be classified as precarious (39 were furloughed), 18 declined due to insufficient incentives, 17 were unable to attend, 12 did not wish to talk online, 9 were too young, and 8 for personal commitments. A slight majority of the participants were male (n=29). Ages ranged between 21-64. Participants were drawn from a mix of cultures and ethnicities with workers from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds in the majority (31 of 56). Participants were involved in a range of industries but primarily in the hospitality, retail, distribution/transportation, and construction sectors often with zero-hour contracts, daily, or other temporary positions. Consistent with required ethical guidelines, we use pseudonyms, and we have altered details to anonymize identifying information. To aid data analysis, all interviews were recorded, resulting in 62 hours of recordings. Following best practice, all recordings were transcribed and supplemented with interview notes. Such notes included reflections on participants' actions, tone of voice, and interpretations of emotional states.

New Normal Data Collection and Participants

As part of our desire to adopt a longitudinal approach, we tried to maintain contact with all the participants following the initial interviews. As initial contact with participants had often involved social media (e.g. Facebook,), online contacts (e.g. Zoom) this process was reasonably non-intrusive and ad hoc. However, the second formal phase of data-gathering was during the New Normal Phase of 2022, when 44 of the 56 participants who were interviewed in 2020 agreed to be interviewed for the second time. Five participants were not contactable, three declined, two were no longer seeking employment (both becoming full-time homemakers), and two were self-employed. Data collection in Phase 2 typically involved interviews that were slightly shorter between 35-50 minutes depending on the nature of the events and availability of time for the

participants involved. We encouraged informants to request a break if they felt it would be beneficial, and a number of interviews were temporarily suspended when participants appeared uncomfortable.

Data Analysis and Coding Procedures

Our inductive data analysis approach focused on exploring key themes to facilitate analysis. Accordingly, we followed a design that drew on the recommendations set out for techniques of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and methods of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Following accepted protocol, to enhance the validity of these processes, the authors conducted analyses independently, compared results and resolved points of difference through debate.

Overall, we adhered to the recommendations of Strauss and Corbin (1998) and we employed three types of coding to identify key themes. The protocols of Strauss and Corbin (1998) identified numerous key data themes and categories. Our process of theme identification began with 'open coding' broadly to identify varying distinct concepts and themes for later categorization and exploration. After this phase of data analysis, we turned to 'axial' coding to organise our data and more importantly to connect data to core categories. At this stage of analysis, we adopted Strauss and Corbin's (1998) approach to dissect our data into core themes. Finally, we employed 'selective' coding further to scrutinise our data and to refine and to integrate both theories and insights (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This theme identification procedure involved extensive iteration and reiteration as part of a process to ensure that we were assured that we had an acceptable understanding of themes and their contextual relationships (Corley and Gioia 2004).

FINDINGS

As outlined previously, data collection and analysis first occurred during the first wave of the pandemic (Spring 2020). As part of the research design, it was deemed appropriate to restart data collection over two years later in the early summer of 2022. We label these two phases (i) Lockdown, and (ii) the New Normal, although we acknowledge the potential limitations of such labelling. To guide the discussion of our findings, Figure 1 presents an overview of our initial insights.

FIGURE ONE HERE

During the first phase of data collection (Lockdown) our focus was on two main issues; first precarious workers' reflections on their treatment prior to the pandemic in order to establish a baseline against which our main focus could secondly explore whether and how they believed their treatment had significantly changed and that they attributed these to the pandemic. As such, the Lockdown phase of data collection, focused on (i) reflections on their past treatment and (ii) how lockdown had generated changes rather than on issues that remained static or unaltered. However, in exploring the New Normal phase, our focus was on participants' interpretations of changes or otherwise to factors that emerged in Phase One.

PRE-PANDEMIC REFLECTIONS

Participants were first asked to reflect on their working lives prior to lockdown. While this approach has limitations in that it requires participants retrospectively to reflect on their treatment/conditions, this process was required to gauge change and, to establish a broad point of reference for understanding differences.

Participants often began discussions by comparing issues prevailing at the point of data collection to pre-pandemic reflections. Unsurprisingly, our data on such reflections is concordant with a range of studies into precarious workers undertaken prior to the pandemic which frequently emphasise the precarity and challenges of such work (see Ikeler, 2019). However, our findings are slightly different in that they reflect worker's reflections with the hindsight of what is to come during lockdown. Analysis of data reveals that participants consistently argued that their treatment by organizations/management was unfair, with their contribution rarely valued while the precarity of their conditions were ignored. However, reflecting the retrospective nature of such comments, participants commonly argued that, while unfair, their working lives pre-lockdown were characterised by what could be termed 'stable insecurity'.

Before all this? I'm not saying it was easy, cos it bloody well wasn't. But it was steady like – well, not always steady but it went up and down and things evened out. You never knew where you were – but you could kinda rely on stuff coming your way at one point or the other. I mean, it was unpredictable week-by-week but better over a two- or three-month period. Consistently, chaotically changing! [Georgie, Male, three years in precarious work]

When asked to reflect on their treatment by those outside of work pre-lockdown, participants consistently contended that their precarity was overlooked by most; with customers treating them as invisible agents, while other agencies focused on other types of employees. Essie comments:

I think that back then we was the ghosts. No unions helping us! Nobody cared about us. No customer tipping us. No MPs campaigning for us. [Finger stabbing into the table at every use of the word 'No'] We was the invisible army that kept shit running and was treated like shite because they could. [Essie, Female, four years in precarious work]

LOCKDOWN:
COVID-driven Changes in Treatment by Employing Organizations & Managers

Precarious workers believed that the COVID-19 pandemic had changed many aspects of their lives. Relative to their pre-lockdown treatment, participants argued that their treatment by employing organizations-managers (including human resource managers) changed profoundly during lockdown phase in four main ways. First, most participants strongly felt that an outcome of COVID-19 was a significantly deepened degree to which those that employed them *even more strongly* attributed little or no value to their precarious workforce. Pre-COVID, most workers considered their employing organizations-managers as exploitative in their management and employment practices, but all participants argued that the events of the pandemic had significantly amplified their lowly status and their poor treatment. Salah details the worsened treatment:

We're zero-hour workers, right? We were always just told – 'be here now', 'be here then'. What's changed? In reality, COVID has made it worse and worse. I still get the same treatment but way worse from them. The only thing that's changed for me is I've got two kids at home who're bored, cooped up and arguing all the time. They didn't think of our home lives before, they think about it even less now.
and later
We [precarious workers] are now treated worse than dirt – we're just the schmucks to fill in when nobody else is prepared to do it. [Salah, Male, three years in precarious work]

The second way workers felt that their treatment had worsened during the pandemic centres on the extent to which organizations were heedless of their increased risks. Magnified by higher levels of expected flexibility and amplified by managerial lip-service, most workers contended that their firms were oblivious of their concerns and reckless in their treatment of frontline workers. Virgil explains [the 'us' and 'we' referring to fellow precarious workers, 'colleagues' to full-time employees]:

In COVID they expect us to be robots! We're expected to turn up and work like zombies – no thought to our safety or our families. 'Colleagues' get to skive off and 'protect family members'. We don't!

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We've people here who've no choice but to work. We're not able to turn down the money because if we do, we'll lose our homes. Their crap about 'our colleagues' safety is paramount' is horse shite – they only care about money not us – we're nothing. [Virgil, Male, one year in precarious work]

Many workers argued that while their employing organizations-managers appeared to bask in the attention given to 'essential work', little thought was given to the frontline and that managers were insensitive to the risks for precarious workers. Curtis's manager appeared to take great delight in explaining that all of his drivers were 'volunteers' when interviewed on the local news. Curtis details the falsity of this:

I'm scared. I'm 55 and my wife's not working. We need the money. I can't afford to say 'no'. I am literally risking my life to work. I go home, strip on the doorstep, straight into the shower but I'm out there for eight hours a day on the deliveries. Who knows who's got it? [Curtis, Male, four years in precarious work]

A third issue for precarious workers was the disconnection between how their managers (including HR managers) treated them and expect them to act on the one hand and the communications of their organizations on the other. Pre-lockdown workers believed that they were widely overlooked but during lockdown, many noted managerial/company attempts superficially to mitigate such commands with shallow attempts to recognise their value. Most workers interpreted such efforts as COVID-driven, lip service, particularly as such comments were inconsistent with the actions of their organizations. Tracy claims:

The shift manager spoke to each of us – first time he's ever said a word to me. He got my name wrong but that's power for the cause, isn't it? Words are cheap – words mean nothing when in the same breath they're saying, 'you do this right now' then 'the rate is the same – take it or leave'. [Tracy, Female, two years in precarious work]

Thus, the majority of participants were scornful of organizations' communications on the grounds that such 'COVID, lip-service' was entirely inconsistent with their current treatment and the actions of their managers.

A fourth issue for precarious workers centred on their feelings regarding their treatment by employing organizations-managers throughout the pandemic. Most participants had experienced extreme cuts to their 'normal' hours of work. While many were often inured (albeit discontented) to unpredictable hours, limited hours in one week were often balanced by better weeks. However, for some workers the pandemic had significantly cut the availability of work from any quarter leading to an

increased awareness of their precarity and workers argued that their semi-abandonment by previous

organizations-managers had generated considerable uncertainty. Although, accustomed to dealing with

working lives that are inherently changeable, precarious workers universally felt that their future

precarity would be *even greater* post-COVID. Neco paints a bleak picture:

The way that they've treated us makes me really worried about the future. They were really quick to
get rid of us and we're all really worried about what's going to happen when this is over. We've got a
WhatsApp group and nobody is terribly optimistic about how they're going to treat us. [Neco, Male,
two years in precarious work]

These views were widely-shared by precarious workers who, while coping with deeply-felt concerns

regarding their future also had to contend with parallel concerns, amplified by their position regarding

how organizations might exploit these circumstances post-COVID.

LOCKDOWN: Changes in Treatment by Others

Participants felt that when compared to pre-lockdown, the tensions between home-work had

exponentially increased throughout the pandemic. Most workers were accustomed to constantly

seeking work and striving to work as much as possible.   Accordingly, most workers were highly-

motivated and found this work ethic strained during the pandemic where family/home pressures rose.

Health concerns were commonly a source of tension as were domestic arrangements where workers

acknowledged their family roles were at odds with work. Fabinho explains:

I worry, you know? Every day I come home – have I got it – will I infect my family? I can't isolate
here – it's too small for that. So every day I strip on the doorstep and wash down – it's the best I can
do. But I worry you know? [Fabinho, Male, five years in precarious work]

In this regard, all participants who continued to work through the pandemic argued that they experienced

dissonance in their home-work lives as needs to earn money were strained against home duties.

Workers also noted that how non-work related people interacted with them changed.

Participants routinely commented that the attitudes of friends/family members evolved. While many

commented that, associates and family members were initially concerned about work infection, as time

progressed, participants felt that their role was valued more.

I've seen the difference. Was about three or four weeks in and they started calling us 'key workers'.
I'm a driver man - I've never been a key worker at anything! But the kids were proud and that's really
nice. The kids to be proud of what you're doing - it gives a warm glow. That's one of the good things

that come out of this. It's nice to be respected and recognised I suppose. [Mane, Male, five years in precarious work]

Concurrently, participants observed that their local community had also changed in their attitudes compared to pre-lockdown. Participants typically felt that their mid-lockdown role was acknowledged by wider-society. Mohammed claimed that his neighbours used to complain about his delivery van on his terrace but felt like neighbours' attitudes had changed with his work portrayed by the media as essential work and included in calls for public recognition:

We go out there and do the clap for carers - kids banging saucepans and stuff but the neighbours across the street have these signs up in the window about the NHS and about people like me that are doing deliveries. I don't know if they know me or what I do, but I don't feel embarrassed about parking the van out the front anymore. [Chrissy, Female, eight years in precarious work]

Finally, all the participants interviewed claimed that they had noticed a substantial change in how they were treated by customers. Again, while early reactions reflected infection concerns, later reactions were seen as very different to pre-COVID treatment. Naby explains:

Before all this, people were moaning at you all the time about being late or just almost throwing it at you but when we do collections now will get smiles and the kids are waving giving you the thumbs up from is a smile to your face. I've even collected packages that've got smiley faces and hearts on them. It gives you a lift you know? [Naby, Male, two years in precarious work]

While such changes were appreciated, most precarious workers felt that they were likely to be short-lived.

NEW NORMAL:
Post-Lockdown Changes in Treatment by Employing Organizations and Managers

Figure 1 also depicts precarious workers' perceptions and interpretations of changes to their treatment by employing organizations/managers in the 'New Normal' phase (see Figure 1).

First, precarious workers highlighted the worsening of the extent to which they were valued by employing organizations/managers. Somewhat surprisingly, given continuing precarity, most participants felt that the New Normal was characterised by a small improvement in the extent to which managers/organizations valued them.

Well, nobody is falling over themselves to give me a full-time contract and the four hundred percent pay is on hold [laughing] but I think the managers here at the branches have changed a bit. Yeah, I think they've been nudged a little. Does that mean that they value us as much as the staff [meaning employees on open-ended contracts]? Probably not. But I think since the early days [of national

lockdowns], they know our value. We'll still be here – they [the organization] can call it loyalty – it isn't [in an aside] but, I think they value us more all the same. So many staff took the furlough and never returned – we're [the zero-hour workers] still here. [Ian, Male, four years in precarious work]

Such improvements were often argued to be 'slight' but probably driven by post-lockdown labour shortages, precarious workers commonly suggested that frontline mangers in particular appeared 'genuinely' to value higher their contribution when compared to Lockdown.

Somewhat inconsistently with improvements in valuing workers, participants also frequently argued that the disregard of their increased stress by employing organizations/managers had remained broadly similar, if slightly worse. That is, workers contended that while COVID-related pressures had changed (and to some degree slackened), the indifference of managers to the idiosyncratic pressures on precarious works had remained similar or slightly worsened. Neco states:

If anything, I would say that that our [precarious workers'] treatment is slightly worse now that it was before. During lockdown it was bad then it eased off for a bit but today it's definitely sort of worse. They [managers] think that once their crises are over, all is good, They've got no sympathy or understanding at all for what we go through. The number of times I heard somebody raise something and all we [precarious workers] get back is 'it's hard for everybody, stop whining'! The pressure grows on us, and they only see their own lives – their own world. [Neco, Male, four years in precarious work]

Employers of precarious workers were often described as hardened by the pandemic to the plight of these workers and indifferent to the risks/stresses involved. Indeed, of the participants interviewed in the second phase of data collection, had caught COVID-19 at least once and over two-thirds believed that they did so at work and received no compensation when they were unable to work. Many were bitter about such perceived callousness and blamed their employers. Indeed, several participants suggested that COVID-related rationales were convenient management façade for ignoring risk to workers in favours of customer demands and organizational/branch profits.

Participants also believed very strongly that the new lockdown-induced management lip-service had significantly worsened during the New Normal and that guarantees made by lip-servicing managers/companies during lockdown were found to be false during the New Normal phase. Analysis of data collected during the New Normal phase found a monotonous view that both managers and organizations had cynically exploited and were continuing to manipulate the issue of COVID, company regulations, and the prevailing labour conditions to maintain workers' precarity. Not one of the workers

who claimed that they were guaranteed permanent employment during lockdowns had been given such contracts by their Lockdown employing organizations. Indeed, two participants were no longer working in the UK, in part due to their treatment post-lockdown, and were employed (permanently) in the EU.

Finally, participants consistently contended that the levels of uncertainty around their work had increased even higher since Lockdown. For many government enforced lockdown had severely affected their income and caused hardship and deep anxiety which post-lockdown 'booms' had done little to dispel. For example:

If you (the interviewer) got COVID, you still got paid right? Me? Us? We got ill because we had to work with the public and then got nothing. Zip. Nada. We took the risk because we had to, and the safety net was nowhere near us. They saved that for people on furlough [shakes head and sighs disgustedly]. [Nadia, Female, seven years in precarious work]

As such, lockdowns could be viewed as events which amplified the precarity of their lives and in that regard continued to generate a deep source of anxiety regarding their future.

NEW NORMAL: Changes in Treatment by Others

During the Lockdown phase of data collection precarious workers stressed that COVID-induced tensons between their work-home lives were greatly increased. In the second phase of data collection, participants typically argued that such tensions had changed but were still high. For example:

The first lockdown was probably the worst – things were very strained. The second not so bad I suppose. Today, it is the same but different. In Lockdown you're stressed out about getting work to pay the bills, the need for money versus risking infection and risking your family. Today it's not about risking infection so much but there's this tension between working all you can to make up of lost earnings versus having a home life. I want to spend time with the boys, but they also needs shoes for school and football boots and trainers and those 'aint cheap these days. [Virgil, Male, three years in precarious work]

For many such workers, lockdown-enforced stay-at-home orders had obliged them to spend more time at home. Although, this caused financial and emotional stress, increased home time had frequently deepened family bonds. However, during the New Normal phase of data collection, participants were commonly working as many hours as they could get (often to clear incurred debts). Consequently, even longer hours than their pre-COVID lives were common but sometimes resented:

Sorry, it's been a bad day - a bad month. I'm working all the hours they can give me, but it grinds you down. When I go home, I just want to sleep but the kids want to play and stuff, and Ashia [his partner] wants to talk about her day and I'm knackered out. I don't get any choice over weekends off – I take

what I can get but there's tantrums and sulking now if I can't spend time with them. [Salah, Male, five years in precarious work]

In this regard, participants argued that the New Normal was characterised by similar levels of work-home tensions, all be these tensions different to the Lockdown stresses.

While participants claimed that their treatment by employing organizations had significantly worsened during Lockdown, in very broad terms, while work-home tensions existed, the reactions of family members, treatment by associates, and the conduct of customers had broadly improved. However, by the time of data collection in the New Normal, participants argued that the halcyon days of appreciation during Lockdown had long departed:

It's gone from thumbs up and clap for key workers and everybody chipping in – Bulldog British, spirit of the Blitz - to slammed doors, abusive comments, people look straight through you. I didn't really expect it to last but I look back now, and it was nice. [whispers] We were human then too! Now, same old, same old! [Emmin, Female, six years in precarious work]

Indeed, most workers argued that their treatment by the wider community and by customers had both very severely worsened to the level that some considered it endemic.

These insights are supported by discussions with participants regarding their overall evaluations of changes to their working lives pre-COVID, during Lockdown, and under the conditions of the New Normal. While some were initially optimistic that the limited positive changes in their treatment by others during Lockdown would continue, such confidence was not shared during the New Normal phase. Alisson summarises this view:

Overall, to sum it up. Lockdown's were bad – I mean really bad. The New Normal is worse – cost of living through the roof, everything's more expensive, we're [zero-hour workers] were just used, patted on the head as good little key workers and then kicked in the balls when it was back to normal – normal-ish. I would say that nothing's changed, but it has – it's gotten worse and keeps getting worse. [Alisson, Male, eight years in precarious work]

In this way, participants generally felt that COVID-19 had and would constitute a condition that managers and organizations would exploit to their advantage and to the disadvantage or precarious workers whose conditions would grow ever more vulnerable.

DISCUSSION

The remainder of this paper is dedicated to a discussion of theoretical contributions, empirical contributions, practitioner implications, and suggestions regarding further research.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to HRM theory through highlighting insights into the importance of 'voice' and giving voice to workers in non-traditional, fragmented, and marginalised employment (see also Harris and Ogbonna, 2013). Indeed, although COVID-19 was unprecedented in modern history of work, especially in the way it elevated traditionally disenfranchised and precarious workers to the centre stage of societal discourses as 'essential workers' (see Crane and Matten, 2021), few research insights have been provided into the perspective of these workers on these momentous changes on human resource management. Through ignoring, overlooking, or simply as neglect and *not* documenting and analysing the experiences and perceptions of precarious work and workers during this exceptional societal event, researchers are tacitly giving credence to the idea that such workers are unimportant (Cubrich and Tengesdal 2021). However, as the few studies which have incorporated precarious workers in exploring the pandemic (Loustaunau *et. al.* 2021; Allan and Blustein, 2022) have argued, the pandemic offers several dimensions that contribute significantly to the understanding of precarious work.

Our study builds on the contributions of Loustaunau *et al.* (2021). on the perceptions of precarious workers and is particularly valuable in that we explore the journeys of these workers across the societal, organizational, and employment/working turbulence of the pandemic. Through tracking the views of precarious workers over this period, we generate fuller understanding of the ways in which the dynamics of the relationships that precarious workers had with various parties were shaped by the pandemic. Specifically, the precarious workers interviewed highlighted the nature of the relationships they had with different parties, and which impacted them differentially. Thus, while the pandemic provided the context for HR and other managers in organizations to enhance their control in ways that many participants described as heightening managerial expectations and exploitation of precarity and 'putting them in a constant state of fear', some recognised differences in their relationships with the wider public. That is, although relationships with managers (including HR managers) remained

negative or even worsened, the pandemic led to positive relationships with the general-public who noticed the important role of precarious workers and accorded them the respect that they were previously unused to – albeit briefly, evidenced in insights from the New Normal. Nonetheless, in some phases of the pandemic some positive developments appeared to cushion the perceived negative treatments from managers/organizations.

This suggests that HRM studies of the employment relationships especially in periods of major societal upheavals, would benefit immensely from additional insights into the lived experiences of workers that tracks their perceptions of the role, processes, their relationships, their fears, and their coping mechanisms. While the substantive accounts of the pandemic have focused on the healthcare implications (Bhandari *et al,* 2021), the voices of these key social actors, who bore much of the risk of interacting with consumers and in ensuring that organizations kept functioning (Cubrich, 2020), have been generally neglected. In these regards, our work builds on the insights provided by other studies of the pandemic (e.g. Bhandari *et al,* 2021; Brammer *et al,* 2023) and is an important step in providing the voice in a way that introduces rich insights in understanding what are commonly complex sets of behaviours and their manifestations in ways that studies that are devoid of the direct experiences of the workers fail to uncover (Kierszytn, 2018).

Empirical Contributions

Empirical contributions to HRM research arise from the insights developed through studying the working lives and experiences of precarious workers longitudinally rather than in a single, snapshot fashion. If our study had been on the early phase of the pandemic alone (Allan and Blustein, 2022), we might have reached different conclusions. However, such conclusions, while interesting, reflects an incomplete account of the dynamics of relationships that were played out as the pandemic unfolded. For example, the relationships that workers had with their organizations became somewhat differentiated, with many precarious workers reporting that their immediate managers showed greater empathy as the pandemic progressed with reported promises of regularised employment post pandemic

reported. This was contrasted with the relationship within the wider organizations which many participants reported as progressively fractured as the pandemic evolved.

Through this longitudinal approach, our work extends the contributions of Cubrich and Tengesdal, (2021) on understanding the relationship dynamics of precarious workers which has strong implications for managing human resources. We achieve this by uncovering the interpretations and evaluations of precarious workers on pandemic-induced changes and by extending this to the interactions with their immediate families and the wider public. Relations with immediate family were, over time, soured by the increasing risks which precarious workers were putting on themselves and their immediate families (Cubrich and Tengesdal, 2021). The relationship with the wider public also changed from the public having little regard for precarious workers pre-pandemic to viewing them as heroes as lockdown intensified, phase back to seeing them as nonentities in the new normal phase. Uncovering these dynamics is important in providing fuller understanding of HRM and precarious work in the context of such disruptive and potentially transformative societal upheaval. Similarly, our findings contribute to the HRM literature by extending understanding of the factors that influence the dynamics of precarious work beyond the traditional theorising of the relationships between management and workers or labour and capital which other scholars have identified as potentially important (e.g. Ikeler, 2019).

Another HR contribution centres on how precarious workers felt they were treated by others during both the two phases of the study. The insights here are complex and, in parts, contradictory – reflecting the interpretations, and conflicted opinions/deeds of those connected with precarious workers. A key illustration of these dynamics is the perceived lip-service paid by human resource managers/supervisors during lockdown. While most workers recognized that managers were merely paying lip service to the efforts of their staff, others were more trusting, and nearly all participants argued that many managers were trying to treat their workers more humanely. Such efforts were likely influenced by a wider societal recognition that many of the roles undertaken by precarious workers were not merely valued but could be classed as 'essential work'. In these regards, this study contributes

empirical evidence regarding how the HR treatment and broader perceptions of a class of workers changed (albeit briefly) driven, in this case, by environmental uncertainty.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study suggest a range of implications that are especially pertinent to public policy and HRM.　The realisation that workers at the lowest levels of organizational hierarchies were also those whose lives were put in danger (as society relied upon them to fulfil everyday needs and services during the pandemic) suggests a pressing need to re-evaluate the status of such workers and their employment conditions. While this calls for broader debates on social and moral rationales that guide the actions and decision-making of the organizations that preside over such HR practices, it also lays the imperative for action bare.　At the very least, the findings suggest an urgent need for public policy change to provide the minimum legal protection for these employees especially in periods of national emergencies.

　　　The implications of our study for human resource management are related to the role of HRM as the organizational function that manages employee perceptions of justice and fairness. The empirical insights gained (especially, during phase 2 of data collection) present the case organizations and managers in an unfavourable light, in that they did not fulfil the promises that were made to workers. As a function that is responsible for helping employees to receive justice, HRM must consider its stance in relation to errant managers who either deliberately or naively misled, obfuscated, or deceived workers during times of need and then conveniently forgot, overlooked, or merely neglected to deliver on earlier promises when conditions changed.　In this regard, HRM scholars should develop more insights into such managerial and organizational deceptions in theorizing, and HRM practitioners should do more to emphasize the importance of fairness and viewing such promises as integral aspects of　the 'psychological contracts' to their fellow managers.　They should stress the significant impacts perceptions of justice and fairness on the motivation of workers even when they are transient workers. Put differently, precarious workers, if treated fairly, will engage positively *even* during periods of extreme need.　Astute human resource managers who encourage their organizations to recognise this

and act accordingly may well tap into a source of sustainable competitive advantage while avoiding the negative publicity often associated with firms viewed as exploiting workers.

Limitations and Further Research

As with all social science studies, the contributions and implications of this research is constrained by the limitations of research design methods. First, while data for this study was gathered longitudinally, the radically different nature of government lockdown policies and practices may have influenced insights and interpretations. Subsequent research which adds to this timeline of data could produce valuable insights. Second, the findings of the study put it on insights gained longitudinally. In this sense, this study demonstrates the value and benefits of exploring social phenomena over time. Future research into such issues could benefit from this approach. Third, while the results of the study seem theoretically generalisable, it is useful to note that the focus of our analysis was on precarious workers in the UK. Additional work into a varying range of contexts and different categories precarious workers could generate interesting insights into different themes and dynamics.

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Figure One: Precarious Workers Perceptions of Their Treatment, Pre-COVID, During Lockdown and during the New Normal

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