ORCA – Online Research @ Cardiff

Surviving Precarious Work: Differing Forms, Tactics and Strategies

Journal:	*Employee Relations*
Manuscript ID	ER-04-2024-0200.R2
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	Precarious workers, zero-hour contracts, insecure work

SURVIVING PRECARIOUS WORK:
DIFFERING FORMS, TACTICS AND STRATEGIES

Abstract

Purpose

This article explores differentiation in the responses of precarious workers to the instability and uncertainty imposed on their work by employing organizations. Our focus is on the ways in which different workers respond to precarious working conditions, with a particular interest on marginalised groups who have been especially overlooked by studies of workforce precarity.

Design/methodology/approach

Employs an approach akin to grounded theory in an exploratory research design and utilizes in-depth, semi-structured interviews of 56 precarious workers.

Findings

Finds that different precarious workers, with divergent characteristics and resources, facing differing working conditions, and diverse structural constraints vary in the ways in which their strategies of surviving precarious work are manifested. Uncovers three differing forms of precarious workers who each employ a different range of tactics and strategies in work.

Originality

Generates insights into differentiation of precarious workers in their responses to the ambiguous, challenging and, in many ways, subjugating conditions of their working conditions.

Keywords

Precarious workers, zero-hour contracts, insecure work,

INTRODUCTION

Although the topic of precarious work has attracted the interests of scholars from a wide range of disciplines and perspectives, there remains a surprising lack of agreement on what constitutes such employment and weather this approach is becoming dominant in work organization (see Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018; Kreshpaj et al., 2020). Specifically, some have positioned the drive to precarious forms of employment as one of the most significant developments in managing work and employment relationships, and one which is increasingly integral to the contemporary economic models of many Western societies (see Green et al., 2016; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018; Ferrer, 2022). One example of the significance of precarious approaches to work organization is revealed in recent analyses by the Trades Union

Congress (TUC) which concluded that the UK is fast becoming a "nation of insecure jobs", with 1 in 9 of the workforce or 3.9 million people being employed in precarious forms of employment (TUC, 2023). However, some scholars have suggested that the term precarious employment may be a misnomer in that it embraces a wide variety of types and levels of employment (see Keune and Pedaci, 2020). Similarly, others have questioned whether the distinguishing features of this work arrangement are new and have argued that the rush to proclaim the ubiquity and omnipresence of what is characterised as precarious work is not commonly matched by empirical evidence of the distinctiveness of such work from previous forms of organization (see Webster, 2008; Fevre, 2017).

Interestingly, while there are divergent views in relation to the uniqueness, historical significance and spread of precarious work, there appears to be a general agreement on the impacts of such approaches to work organization on the workers concerned. For example, researchers have documented the ways in which such forms of employment can induce feelings of anxiety, depression, and loss of self-esteem (see Allmer, 2018). In this regard, many have highlighted the ways in which the worst impacts of the recent COVID-19 pandemic were borne by workers in precarious employment who were disproportionately exposed to the virus and who experienced profound, and in many cases, tragic consequences (e.g. Bhandari et al., 2021; Brammer et al., 2023). However, little attention has been devoted to the ways in which different groups of workers respond to the nature and levels of precarity imposed on them by work organizations, as well as the factors which may influence these responses.

This article explores differentiation in the responses of precarious workers to the instability and uncertainty imposed on their work by employing organizations. Our focus is on the ways in which different workers respond to precarious working conditions, with a particular interest on marginalised groups who have been especially overlooked by studies of workforce precarity (see Harrison et al., 2022). Specifically, we explore the experiences of precarious workers whose backgrounds may bestow particular idiosyncratic resources or

additional obstacles and the ways in which these may influence workers' responses to precarious conditions of employment.   A greater understanding of precarious work from the perspectives of different groups of workers, especially those from different ethnic and racial backgrounds is particularly important in the context of the evidence which suggests an increasing racialisation of precarious work in the UK (see TUC, 2023) and in other parts of the world (e.g. Keune and Pedaci, 2020). Prior to a presentation of the research methods and the findings of this study, it is necessary to provide an overview of the literature that guided the work.

DEALING WITH PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT: A REVIEW OF RESEARCH

While there are different definitions of precarious work, such employment is often characterised as uncertain, and comprising non-pensionable work wherein the employer controls the key aspects of the employment relationship but bears little or no risk (see Kalleberg, 2009; Hewison, 2016). Such work is also typically intense, low paid and offers limited access to social benefits, worker representation, and training and development opportunities (Keune and Pedaci, 2020).

The limited opportunities for socialisation and representation in precarious work are two reasons why Lewchuk and Dassinger (2016) argue that workers in precarious employment have considerable difficulties in engaging in activities which many 'regular' employees commonly take for granted. In this regard, while regular work patterns can encourage employee socialisation with ample opportunities to organise and embark on collective action, precarious work limits such opportunities and as such restricts the capacities workers have to resist managerial control. However, while the inherent features of precarious employment may undermine the scope for worker cooperation and resistance, Lewchuk and Dassinger (2016) argue that there are nevertheless some aspects of what they describe as 'low key resistance' in such employment. Such low-key resistance is typically clandestine in ways that emphasise the

desire of the individuals concerned to maximise their self-interests. There is sporadic evidence that they may be found across geographical boundaries in that they have been reported in industrialised nations such as Canada (see Lewchuk and Dassinger, 2016) and in the context of developing countries (see Hlatshwayo, 2018).

Although there have been considerable studies into various forms of precarious work, few studies have explored the wide variety of experiences of workers engaged in precarious employment. The few studies that have investigated the experiences and responses of precarious workers have sought to delineate the factors that may influence these responses and experiences (see also Harrison et al., 2022). For example, while researchers have identified evidence of psychological trauma in many precarious workers (e.g. Lewchuk, 2017; Allmer, 2018), the level of this and the extent to which it is experienced may be influenced by subjective socio-cultural, economic, and individual characteristics. Specifically, emerging research evidence suggests that two different people with the same precarious job can have markedly different experiences and perceptions of such employment (see also Escudero-Castillo et al., 2021). Such subjective influences in interpretations of experiences emphasise the need for research investigations into idiosyncratic individual characteristics to generate further insights into the dynamics of precarious work.

The theme of individual attributes has been extended to the study of demographic characteristics in influencing worker consciousness and responses to organizational control in precarity. For example, researchers have identified age and economic background as potentially relevant factors in understanding individual responses to precarious working conditions. In this regard, Antonucci's (2018) work provides an interesting illustration of how young precarious workers may have different experiences from precarious work depending on their economic background, with those who have external family support being less likely to suffer the full negative effects of precarity. Similarly, Peticca-Harris et al. (2020) suggest that

turbulent economic conditions and financial security are major factors that encouraged individuals from different backgrounds to engage in precarious work.

Ikeler's (2019) study into the activities of precarious workers in the US, provide contrasting insights into the potential influence of demographic characteristics in understanding the predispositions of workers towards organizational control. For example, workers over 30 years old were found to be more likely to be oppositional to management control and were more inclined to support union membership. Interestingly, race emerged as a factor in that racial and ethnic minority workers were less likely to exhibit union support or class consciousness. Ikeler's (2019) findings on the potential influence of race in precarious work are supported by recent research by Castro (2022) and Arday (2022) whose study of the teaching profession find that racial minorities are more acutely impacted by employment precarity. These findings also echo the contributions of Harrison et al., (2022) who argue that marginalised ethnic minority groups (such as Roma groups) experience additional disadvantages in precarious work that are influenced by their long history of oppression and in the case of Roma groups, their peculiar engagement in the labour market.

However, although race and ethnicity have emerged as potentially important in influencing responses to precarious work, these have commonly been incidental findings with few empirical studies including race and ethnicity in their research aims and designs. Harrison et al.'s (2022) study of Roma ethnic group is one of the few studies that is devoted to the impact of ethnicity on precarious work. While this study reveals interesting insights into the additional oppressive and exploitative experiences of marginalised precarious workers, the study is limited to Roma ethnic groups whose peculiar social and cultural environments were viewed as helping them to deal with aspects of their precarious conditions. It is for this and other reasons that scholars have called for additional studies of precarious workers that focus on the experiences of wider range of ethnic and racial groups especially those from minority groups (see Kalleberg and Vallas, 2008; Arday, 2022).

Overall, the brief review of literature on the experiences and responses of precarious workers suggests that this topic has not received research interest that is proportional to the interest into other aspects of precarious work. These research limitations appear more evident in relation to the multiple particularities of individual dispositions, ways of coping, as well as the socio-cultural, economic, and especially the ethno-racial dimensions that shape such dispositions.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Overall, we deem our research stance to be primarily interpretivist in nature, which reflects our constructivist ontological and epistemological perspectives (see Denzin 1988). As the aim of our research is to explore the responses of precarious workers to the instability and uncertainty imposed on their work by employing organizations, we employed 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.

After obtaining the required full ethical approval for the study design and implementation procedures from the ethics committee of the lead author, we undertook 56 in-depth interviews with precarious workers who had zero-hour contracts. Transcripts logs show that, on average, the mean interview time was 67 minutes (the shortest interview being 47 minutes and the longest 131 minutes). Interviews began with an explicit confirmation regarding the confidentiality of data collection, reaffirming written details sent to each participant before data collection and explained fully in a detailed project and participant consent form signed by each party. We gathered data from a sample of precarious workers who answered an online advertisement for a study of workers whose jobs were insecure. Our criteria for inclusion centered on workers whose principal source of income was classified as 'precarious'. Of the 168 initial contacts, 48 were excluded as their jobs were not classified as precarious, 18 declined due to unsatisfactory inducements, 17 were unable to attend interviews, 12 were not comfortable with the recording

technology, 9 were too young to be included (below 18), and 8 withdraw for personal reasons. Participants worked in a range of industries but primarily in the retail, hospitality, transportation/distribution, and construction sectors often with zero-hour contracts, daily, or other temporary positions. Just over half of the participants self-identified as male (n=29), while across all participants, ages ranged from 21 to 64. The sample reflected a broad mix of cultures and ethnicities with workers from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds in the majority (31 of 56).

We have modified details to anonymize identifying information. To aid data analysis, all interviews were recorded, resulting in just over 62 hours of recordings. All recordings were fully transcribed and annotated with interview notes. Such annotations include notes on the body language, actions, tone of voice, and displayed emotions of participants. In this way, our analysis combined interview transcripts and our observations (see Merton 2008).

In conducting the interviews, emphasis was also placed on gaining "tacit" knowledge that emerged from non-verbal cues such as nods, silences, or humor (Altheide and Johnson 1994). All interviews, observational data and interviewer reflections were systematically recorded and transcribed. To accomplish *research triangulation,* we adopted a structured data analysis approach and used a 'concurrent-dual' procedure of analysis, whereby we undertook data analyses independently, yet concurrently. This helped ensure reliability and consistency of the results (Campbell *et al.,* 2013). Results were compared and all points of divergence were discussed until a consensus was reached.

Our overall research approach was designed to enable us to explore themes and insights both during and after data collection. This reflects our appreciation of the data collection/analysis recommendations of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and methods of naturalistic inquiry (see Lincoln and Guba 1985). The lead and the second author undertook data analysis concurrently and yet independently, using identical procedures and resolving differences through discussion and debate. Coding procedures drew on our

experience in successfully following the principals and guidelines of Strauss and Corbin (1998). Specifically, we used open coding tentatively to identify themes and categories (open coding) followed by organizing our data into key themes and connecting categories (axial coding) and culminating with dissecting such themes (selective coding). This is not to suggest that our approach was linear but rather our analysis involved considerable reflection with iteration and reiteration until we were satisfied that our analysis had generated a fair and nuanced understanding of relationships and themes (Corley and Gioia 2004).

While our data collection and analysis structure and procedures were designed to enhance the validity of our findings, as with all data collection/analysis we acknowledge that a potential source of bias is the perceived ethnicity, age, and gender of the research team whose appearance could bias responses. When listening to the narratives of participants, the interviewers were reminded of their own experiences of prejudice (for BME interviewer) and of past experiences of precarious work (for the white interviewer). Nevertheless, the team endeavoured to maintain as objective a stance as possible to allow the participants to express their views in their own ways.   We used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) critical criteria for gauging our data and employed their tactics to enhance the dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability of our analyses. For instance, our interview protocol/guide was semi-structured, which provided consistency and structure across interviews while facilitating deeper and richer discussions as novel insights and themes emerged.

FINDINGS

Consistent with a raft of earlier research, our study finds that the impact of precarious work fundamentally affects the lives of such workers. Workers recognised that such employment practices caused not only financial hardships and inequities, but also led to psychological and emotional effects which many felt structurally alienated them and harmed both their work and home lives. While we fully accept that such issues are important and should be acknowledged

as profound, our focus was less directly on the impact of such work and more on exploring variations and differences in the nature of the responses of precarious workers and the factors that influence such responses. As such, our work is premised on the assumption that rather than constituting a single analogous entity, precarious workers differ significantly with varying responses to their precarity. In this regard, we argue that different precarious workers, with divergent characteristics and resources, facing differing working conditions, and diverse structural constraints will vary in the ways in which their strategies of surviving precarious work are manifested. We identify three distinct forms of precarious workers who we label i. Belligerent Active-Battlers, ii. Precarious Intermittent-Strivers, and iii. Precarious Repressed-Endurers.   These identifying labels/terms were derived from data analysis and draw on terms/interpretations of participants but are our own identifying terms. As such, participants did not use our terms/labels but would often refer to types or forms of precarious worker groups using their own, idiosyncratic jargon and language (reflecting their diverse backgrounds). In this regard, while participants often described their working lives in great details and commonly used slang or less than flattering terms to describe other workers with whom they had some contact, in general terms, most participants had limited experience of the wider environment which restricted the breadth and scope of their reflections and analysis of other workers. The remainder of our findings are dedicated to explicating these different forms and tactics of precarious workers and the factors that influence these responses.

1. Precarious Belligerent Active-Battlers

During data collection and continuing through all phases of data analysis, strong evidence emerged that some precarious workers interviewed actively (but frequently surreptitiously) engaged in activities that dynamically sought to undermine aspects of the conditions imposed by the precarity of their work. These workers we labelled with a shorthand label of 'Active-Battlers' as they characteristically not merely self-identified and recognised that their labour

was being exploited but also that they were fortunate enough to possess skills or access to resources that enabled them judiciously to undertake some actions that could alleviate or reduce some of the negative impacts of precarity. This is not to suggest that Active-Battlers were able fundamentally to change their roles or overcome management-imposed regulation but rather reflects that they; first, recognised their exploitation, second, that they had sufficient 'resources', skills and/or social/cultural capital to undertake some acts to undermine such control and third, that their ongoing efforts, deliberately, selectively (and often covertly) were intentionally designed to fight that which they perceive to be unfair.

Such workers predominantly, spoke English as their first (and less commonly, their second) language and their communication skills were at the least 'good' with many having 'very good' communication abilities. The educational achievements of such workers were polarised; some were university students with good levels of educational attainment while others had limited educational qualifications. Active-Battlers were typically white British or were educated in the UK or under a similar system (for example, Gibraltarian) and most had lived exclusively in the UK. Commonly, Active-Battlers had limited work experience, and most had not held a full-time post for longer than a month. Most Active-Battlers were younger than their fellow precarious workers, although some were considerably older than average.

A key characteristic of Active-Battlers workers was range of tactics they employed to mitigate their precarity as much as they were able. In some regards, Active-Battlers could be viewed as actively undermining managerial approaches to control their work. Most forms of the tactics employed by Active-Battlers were individual in nature, in part reflecting the harsh reality of their working lives where conditions preclude collective action – although some alluded to the need for such actions. While many idiosyncratic tactics emerged, four main forms were found.   The first two of these approaches required developed social skills and often personal charisma in that both forms centred on cajoling managers to permit extra hours or shifts of work. First were efforts to increase hours. While many workers were explicitly

told that they had no control over their hours of work other than accepting or declining the

hours offered by managers, Active-Battlers argued that, on occasions, they could wheedle

additional hours of work. Rick comments:

> The more hours they give me, the more money they give me. They call me in for a
> three-hour shift – fine but if I can persuade them that this or that also needs doing
> then I make an extra hour, I get an extra hour's pay. If I can make it last the next half
> hour, I get an extra half hour's pay. You do that every shift and it makes you money.
> If they say at the start 'I've only got three hours' then you only do three hours. If
> they say it's going to take three hours, you get an hour or two hours in and tell them
> 'you want me to finish, it's going to take more time. Your choice man! You're the
> boss!' Sometimes they'll say just do in the time you've got – other times they'll see
> and help you out. [Rick, Male, five years in precarious work]

Similarly, a second strategy was a slight variation of such an approach in that workers used

tactics designed to lead to extra shifts of work (rather than hours). Daryl explains:

> The more shifts you work the more money you get, so you just gotta make sure that
> whenever the phone rings, you pick up now! You're the first person. You take the
> shift the second you get it. When you leave – 'do you need me again?' 'When do
> you need me? 'When do you next want me?' 'Can I do this?' "Yeah! can I do that"
> and all of this just brings in the money for me. I don't mind I'm not doing anything
> else! [Daryl, Male, three years in precarious work]

It is important to note that participants of all types commonly believed that native English

speakers were preferred by employers, who treated them as privileged and were thus more

likely to be sought by managers (although Active-Battlers often viewed this not necessarily as

a privilege). These two approaches centre on increasing income from places of work via

stimulating an increasing the amount of work from employers. As such, Active-Battlers use

their skills to overcome the constraints enforced by the manner of their precarious

employment.

The third tactic of Active-Battlers in precarious employment focuses on their

knowledge of the UK system. While such workers have comparatively low levels of work

experience, their family/social circle are UK-based and often local. Such associates contribute

knowledge of the system and permits such workers to use their social skills and networks of

knowledge to improve their income. Carol, talks of her recent move from a rural area to a

local city where she works three jobs (two of which she started having been introduced to the

employer by her partner):

> You got to play the system. The system! I'm not here to make friends. I'm not here
> to sit on my arse. I'm not here for your fantastic weather! I'm here to make money.
> So, when it comes to the evening, do I wanna spend my time sitting in a room
> watching TV 'n surfing the net? No way! If I can spend that time making money, I
> spend that time making money. That means I'm delivering papers and then I'm
> delivering papers. If that means I'm delivering food, I deliver foods. If it means I'm
> cleaning pots and pans, then that's what I does. I don't care that it's on a zero our
> contract! What's that – never had a proper contract in my life! Where I come from
> they don't exist! People just damn work!   [Carol, Female, eleven years in precarious
> work]

The fourth tactic used by Active-Battlers was using their knowledge of their direct work-

suppling manager to their advantage.   Such workers used different tactics based on their

gender.   Male respondents frequently discussed their tactics to enrol the 'support' of their

direct superordinate – commonly referred to as 'sucking up to the boss':

> Hey! If that means I get an extra shift, I'll suck up to the boss. Just means being nice
> and friendly. No problem! I don't mind kissing a bit of butt! Give me five years I'm
> going to be in his position and people can kiss my fat ass! [Carl, Male, three years in
> precarious work]

Disturbingly, the approaches of female respondents were similar but often entailed a sexualised

element.   Maggie explains:

> This is about money. If that means I gets to flutter in my eyelashes and calling 'hey
> there big man', I don't mind doing that! A bit of flirting to get yourself a few more
> hours a few more shifts? What's the harm in that? No touching now! But a little
> flirting doesn't do any harm. [Maggie, Female, eight years in precarious work]

While such tactics were frequently shrugged off as embarrassing when undertaken by

colleagues, most precarious workers Active-Battlers for work claimed that their own ways of

'playing the boss' were distressingly effective.

2. Precarious Intermittent-Strivers

While Active-Battlers actively fought to limit their precarity, the second category of precarious

workers, 'Intermittent-Strivers', were significantly less proactive in their efforts but still

actively used tactics, to eschew some aspects of managerial actions.   Intermittent-Strivers were

less likely (compared to Active-Battlers) to recognise organizations as exploitive and were less successful in some of their attempts to circumvent them. This is not to suggest that such workers were less intelligent or less socially aware than Active-Battlers but more to highlight that their circumstances, skills, resources, and other pressures structurally disadvantaged them and constrained their ability to recognise/overcome such pressures. Nonetheless, Intermittent-Strivers were characterised by intermittent, discontinuous, but recurrent attempts to better their working lives. In this regard, a key difference between Active-Battlers and Intermittent-Strivers is that Active-Battlers claimed to engage in their tactics on a regular basis (at least once a day) while Intermittent-Strivers engage in the strategy only when they see a realistic opportunity or when such behaviours are viewed as feasible.

In contrast to Active-Battlers, Intermittent-Strivers were predominately drawn from second or third generation immigrants to the UK (although a small minority were first generation immigrants). In terms of education, most were educated in the UK with fair-good English communication skills with most leaving fulltime education with limited formal qualifications. Intermittent-Strivers often spoke English bi-or tri-lingually with a significant minority (around 40%) claiming English was not their primary language. Intermittent-Strivers were typically older than Active-Battlers with more work experience. These workers were much more likely to have more than one source of work with all sources being precarious.

Data analysis revealed three main forms of survival by Precarious Intermittent-Strivers each of which was facilitated by two contingent factors. First, reflecting networks of associates (family/friends from the same community), Intermittent-Strivers used their contacts to connect with suppliers of work. Michonne explains how she uses her communication skills to connect with people from the same community to her advantage:

> If I am at work, I look for it like everybody else. After you've been here a few
> months, you get to know people. You get you get to know who works where. Who
> does the hiring who does the calling around. Are they Asian? African? They come
> from my country? If they do, use it. People want to work with people they know and

trust. If there is a connection – I'll use it? 'Got kids?' 'Me too!' 'Married?' 'Me too, man!' [Michonne, Female, four years in precarious work]

Second, the wider and more extensive experience of precarious work and the wider connection to other precarious workers in similar positions enabled Intermittent-Stivers to ensure that they utilised every benefit and advantage (no matter how small) to which they had access. For some workers avoiding rate-busting work such acts constituted a form of revenge. Glenn and Lennie detail their approaches:

Everywhere has rules. I'm not here to make them money. I take my breaks when I can. I take extra breaks when I can. You take their rules and take what you can. I'm not busting a gut here. [Glenn, Male, two years in precarious work]

If they're going to treat us like people that they can just pick up and drop, how can they be surprised when we take every benefit that's coming? Food breaks? Cigarette breaks? Comfort breaks? Every benefit we'll take. Staff discount for a friend? Freebies from here? You treat people badly and that will treat you badly. [Lennie, Male, six years in precarious work]

Precarious Intermittent-Strivers rarely felt that their work accrued many benefits, but a small minority claimed that rarely supervisors (from the same cultural background) tacitly accepted their surreptitiously taking of minor perks to which they were not entitled (food and drinks) which technically breached their employers rules. Lauren cautiously whispered during her interview:

Everywhere has perks. We are at the bottom of the ladder here but we still get perks….sort of. You need to be careful – Jo, she's from my estate – she'll turn a blind eye to taking up some little things that nobody wants. Nothing big - just a bit – others'll sack you for taking a coffee bean! [Lauren, Female, two years in precarious work]

The third approach of surviving precarity was found in a minority of cases where Intermittent-Strivers claimed that they used their conditions of employment to their benefit. While most precarious workers have very limited control over their hours or work, Intermittent-Strivers with multiple sources of work can occasionally use their position to work multiple jobs in a manner that suits their needs. Although comparatively rare, such an approach was relatively successful for some Intermittent-Strivers. Alanna discusses her approach:

Everyone thinks that you take on this work because you don't get a choice. It's true for a lot of people. I'm not saying this is a lifestyle that everyone wants but for me it suits me right now. I can work when I want to work and then when I cannot work or I don't wanna work, I don't! It's really boring and dull work but if I wanna really go for it this week - I want to do a 80 or 90 hour a week that's my choice. Does that mean I can have an easy week next week? Yeah probably. I'll probably work better but it just means that you get choice. So, this week I'm going to work really long hours because that suits me. Next week and she's [her wife who lives in different city] over, so I'll take it easier. They think they're playing us but we're playing them too. [Alanna, Female, two years in precarious work]

While analysis revealed three main approaches for Intermittent-Strivers, efforts were also made to explore and understand how and why Intermittent-Strivers adopted these tactics. In this regard, two main reasons emerged. First, as mentioned earlier, Intermittent-Strivers typically were socially connected to other precarious workers in similar roles, often drawn from their own communities. Such contacts exchanged information about precarious work roles, particularly when friends or family members worked alongside each other. For example:

When I first started here, I wouldn't say 'boo to a goose'! First real job – first real money in my hand, I was just doing my best boy act (laughing). But the other guys, they taught me the tricks of the trade. How to survive at this! I've been trained by the best! We guys we know the score here – what we take and what we accept. Give and take is what it is. [Glenn, Male, four years in precarious work]

She took me under her wing – without her they took me for a royal ride. She's good woman and watched out for me – I learned everything about this place from her. How to get by – how to make a living doing this. She taught me how to push back without getting run over. [Maggie, Female, two years in precarious work]

In this way, Intermittent-Strivers, learned their approaches from co-workers in similar roles who worked under similar pressures. Second, and less commonly, Intermittent-Strivers employed their survival strategies after (often detrimental) experiential learning. Ezekiel explains how he learned gently to 'push back' against work-based exploitation:

I learned to job – not doing the job – two days and you've got that man. I mean, I learned what to do not to get totally [swear word] over – a little push back here and there use their rules back on them. [Ezekiel, Male, six years in precarious work]

That is, such workers learned to strive intermittently and selectively to improve their lives where possible after experiencing their work role and testing the limits of their position.

3. Precarious Repressed-Endurers

The final category of precarious workers are labelled 'Precarious Repressed-Endurers'. Such

workers were characterised by limited or no extended strategies of survival beyond getting on

with the job. As such, these workers were widely viewed by themselves, other workers, and by

managers as the 'most' precarious of all. That is, such workers faced the most extreme

disadvantages and working conditions often combined with very limited resources to mitigate

their circumstances. For such workers, strategizing was frequently deemed impractical, and

their approach was commonly to respond to exploitation through endurance and perseverance.

Some Active-Battlers and Intermittent-Strivers viewed workers that (using our analysis-derived

label and not participants', often more pejorative descriptions) could be labelled Precarious

Repressed-Endurers as competitors and were dismissive of their position. For example,

Eugene and Aaron comment:

> Man, they're a lost cause – too damn dumb to do anything but get screwed by the
> firm. No point talking with them – they're so far down the pecking order its scary
> man. [Eugene, Male, two years in precarious work]

> In this job you've got wolves and sheep – the wolves, play for what we can – we
> hunt for what we can and we eat okay. The sheep? They don't even bleat man – they
> just roll over and take it. [Aaron, Male, seven years in precarious work]

Nonetheless, some Active-Battlers and Intermittent-Strivers were more sympathetic to those

who could be viewed as Precarious Repressed-Endurers, acknowledging their unequal but still

difficult positions:

> I would feel sorry for them but we're all struggling these days. Life is hard and I
> need to worry about me and first. [Joan, Female, three years in precarious work]

Repressed-Endurers workers were typically recent BME immigrants to Europe.

Typically, such workers were educated outside of Europe. Few of these workers held formal

qualifications (although two had overseas degrees) and, on average, such workers were older

and more likely to be married. Over half of those married workers had partners who lived

overseas, and most workers had very limited social support from family, although many shared

houses/flats with people from their country of birth. In all cases, Repressed-Endurers were the

main earner for their household with the majority frequently sending money to family based

abroad.

In terms of surviving precarity, Repressed-Endurers undertook very few tactics other

than dogged endurance. These workers commonly lacked access to the social and cultural

capital of active-battlers and to the social capital of the Intermittent-Strivers. Interestingly,

Repressed-Endurers were largely BME immigrant workers and constitute the fastest growing

precarious segment in the UK (see TUC, 2023). Many such workers felt that any obvious,

explicit, or ostentatious displays of resistance were unwise. This is not to suggest that

Precarious Repressed-Endurers did not wish to better their lives but merely reflects their choice

was more often to strictly internalise their feelings and severely restrict their behavioural

resistance (see later). Nonetheless, two (often ineffectual) tactics were noted. First, Precarious

Repressed-Endurers used passive resistance by limiting their work efforts to the minimum

required. Jesus talks bitterly of his forced move from a part-time contract to a zero-hours

contract:

> I used to put in a lot of effort. Used to work really hard you know? They moved us to
> these contracts - they just tell us when they want us - we never know where we are
> from day to day. Did that mean I change my mind? Yeah, of course! Zero effort
> contract. I do what they tell me to do. If they don't tell me to do anything, I'm
> working and relaxing and talking to my friends I can't afford to get in trouble so I
> just do the very minimum - people at home [his home country] get treated better..
> [Jesus, Male, one year in precarious work]

Second, Precarious Repressed-Endurers less commonly employed the tactic of playing ignorant

as an approach to survive exploitative management practices. Siddiq comments:

> You can't push hard in my position. I need the money. The work is bad – three hours
> here, four there – sweeping up what they don't cover. I just play dumb and avoid
> doing stuff I don't want to do. [In a very accented voice] Sooo sorry I no understood
> you'. Silly it is but it's all I can do – I get difficult and they'll stop the hours.
> [Siddiq, Male, four years in precarious work]

This tactic was selectively employed by Repressed-Endurers to avoid direct conflict but was

used to justify limited output.

An issue of particular interest was exploring the motives for the limited/absent active

rather than passive survival strategies exhibited by such workers. Analysis revealed three main

reasons for such constrained resistance levels; each of which pivoted in perceived intimidation.

First, Repressed-Endurers participants argued that their limited knowledge of the

organizational, legal, or wider cultural system, formal and informal rules created an

intimidating impression of the system of work in the UK. For example:

> I don't know how things work here like I know it back home. The money is good
> here but the costs are so high. Living here is very expensive. [Negan, Male, four
> years in precarious work]

> If I don't get money, I lose my room and I'm on street. I'm not gonna risk that – the
> house – they just throw you out if you've got no money – yelling at boss isn't clever!
> [Beth, Female, one year in precarious work]

Second, other workers argued that management represented figures of authority which many

felt used their positions to intimate workers into obedience. Yumiko and Tyreese both claimed

that their direct superordinate intentionally intimated workers:

> He can just sack me tomorrow! He threatens us with no work unless we move faster.
> He's not a nice man. He's a lazy dog who just barks and yips! [Yumiko, Female, two
> years in precarious work]

> I'm not stupid. You try and tell the boss what to do – he'll just fire you. No work –
> no pay. I have rent and food and have no money but what's here. So, I just bow my
> head and work – it's not so bad. [Tyreese, Male, four years in precarious work]

Third, these interpretations contributed to a general view that the size, breadth, and power of

large firms daunted many precarious workers who felt powerless to fight what were often

viewed as coercive systems. Sophia suggests:

> This is a big, big firm. They know what to do. They've got huge build full of men
> working out what we to do. Who am I to argue with them? I just do what I'm told. I
> work when they say, how they say and take the money. [Sophia, Female, three years
> in precarious work]

CONTRIBUTIONS

The aim of this study was to explore the differentiation in the responses of precarious workers

to the instability and uncertainty imposed on their work by employing organizations with a

focus on understanding how workers (especially racially marginalised workers) internalise and deal with their perilous employment conditions as well as the factors that influence these responses. A clear contribution centres on the differentiation of precarious workers in their responses to the ambiguous, challenging and, in many ways, subjugating conditions of their working conditions. At a fundamental level this study highlights the obvious, and yet, often overlooked point, that precarious workers are not merely a management resource; not simply a homogenous group of flexible workers for organizations to exploit when convenient and to treat uniformly (see for example Castro, 2022). To emphasize the poor working conditions of precarious workers, it is possible that the use a single term in scholarly contributions to denote such workers has inadvertently led others to assume uniformity in both the treatment of such workers by managements *and* homogeneity of such workers in their responses. While the use of short-hand labels as over-arching categorisations are understandable, such data reduction may also generate incomplete stereotypes and naïve, overly-simplistic caricatures. In the current study, evidence is found of wide differentiation in how precarious workers experience and deal with imposed working conditions. Such insights strongly suggest that precarious workers vary widely in their responses and experiences.

Our finding that precarious workers actively engaged in a juxtaposition of tactics and approaches in attempting to reduce the negative effects of their precarity suggests several implications. Specifically, these findings suggest that although the scope for precarious workers to engage in resistance, they are not completely docile in their dealing with managers (see also Lewchuk and Dassinger, 2016). Similarly, the availability of these tactics and approaches as well as the different capacities of workers to exploit them are important issues that require further elaboration. Our findings suggest that the deployment and exploitation of these tactics were influenced by a variety of contextual factors which differed across groups; with individuals in the relatively 'privileged' groups (those with linguistic skills and cultural and social capital) being able (successfully in their estimation) to adopt a wider range of tactics

than those in groups that lacked such resources. A key consideration that arises from this is that access to these types of resources (linguistic, culture and social capital) is commonly linked to ancestral advantages and demographic similarity in ways that are more likely to advantage white workers and disadvantage their BME counterparts (Ogbonna, 2019). This means that the capacity to deploy resources which may help individuals to navigate some of the demeaning and damaging aspects of precarious work is not evenly distributed across workers. Instead, this is commonly predicated on race and ethnicity. One implication of this is that racial and ethnic minorities experience multiple disadvantages from their engagement in work that is already known to be perilous (Lewchuk, 2017; Allmer, 2018; Harrison et al., 2022), but also from the discrimination that they commonly encounter (see also Arday, 2022; Castro, 2022). These disadvantages are likely to be more profound in the cases of immigrant ethnic minorities, especially those who have limited language, social and culture capital skills as they are likely, through no fault of their own or direct job-related reasons, to be placed at the bottom of the surviving employment hierarchy as Repressed-Endurers.

The findings of the potential role of racial discrimination in surviving precarious work contributes important insights into the understanding of workplace racism that are in stark contrast to existing studies of racial prejudice. While studies of racism in organizations commonly focus on the direct and indirect actions of people (managers and co-workers), systems and processes (see Harris and Ogbonna, 2017), the findings of this study demonstrate that the potential for intra-organizational racial disadvantage may arise from extra-organizational dynamics through the inter-mingling of socio-cultural and linguistic factors which may have nothing to do with the job. This suggests a need to expand understanding of the sources of discrimination beyond intra-organizational variables to the broader societal considerations from which much racialization and the consequences of racial injustice are rooted (see Bonilla-Silva, 2021).

Interestingly, the capacity of all precarious workers to deal with management control is likely to be undermined by the decrease in white precarious workers (who are more likely to be the Active-Battlers and Intermittent-Strivers).   Recent reports that the numbers of white precarious workers have steadily declined as the numbers of BME migrant labour in such work have increased suggest a greater ongoing racialization of precarious work in the UK (see TUC, 2023).   Indeed, while this may be beneficial for organizations which seek to maximize their profits through judicious management of their workforce, it could be argued that such a focus could exacerbate the unfairness which, this study finds, arises from the unequal access to resources that help workers to cope with the demands of such jobs.   In this regard, governments aiming to use large numbers of immigrant labour to fill the gaps that are created as domestic workers shun precarious work should be consider these implications carefully. That is, such policies may have the unintended consequence of feeding into the negative labour market discrimination that this study documents and that has been hinted elsewhere (e.g. Arday, 2022; Castro, 2022; Harrison, et al., 2022).   It could even be argued that, immigrant ethnic minority workers are destined to be vulnerable to unfair exploitation by less scrupulous employers through the precarious nature of the jobs and through the increased susceptibility to racial prejudice.

A core aim of this study is to explore differences in the responses of precarious workers in dealing with working conditions. Data analysis underscored that wide variation in reactions were evident.   Fundamentally, participants clearly demonstrated that they were far from passive recipients.   While managements exert control over many aspects of the working conditions, within, very often, extremely limited boundaries, some workers battled and strove to improve their working lives, albeit marginally. As such, many precarious workers viewed those imposing such working conditions as the adversaries over which they would try to overcome, or least, achieve some successes. This is not to suggest that all precarious workers were able to overcome all disadvantages or defect all unfairness – this was far from the case.

However, many participants were reflective and proactive in their responses to precarious work and within limited boundaries found ways of improving their working lives. In this regard while some precarious workers proactively battled and strove against precarity, others with fewer resources endured conditions which it is difficult to present as societally-equitable. Future studies could explore these distinctions further and should incorporate a range of wider variables into the focus of analysis. It seems likely that individual (such as personal or personality based factors), role (such as, the nature of the role undertaken), and sector-contextual factors (such as, work/sector factors) could generate an even greater, and more nuanced, undertaking of these issues.

The findings of this study suggest an important implication for practice. The evidence of the spread of precarious work and the increasing numbers of people that are caught in these exploitative work arrangements suggest that there is urgent need to re-think how such work is regulated as well as how those that are caught up in it are offered some form of protection. As highlighted earlier, one of the features of this type of employment is the lack of worker voice and representation. However, the findings of this study suggest that the need for representation is potentially more profound for these workers than for any other workers. Indeed, it is surprising that Trade Unions which commonly pride themselves in improving working conditions have not achieved much success in this area. In this regard, it is possible that, with the new Labour Government in the UK, Trade Unions will be in a stronger position to lobby for legislative changes to regulate such employment and to give the unions a foothold to negotiate their conditions of employment. Developments in other parts of the world suggest that there are lessons that UK unions can learn on thinking strategically to improve the conditions of precarious workers (see Keune and Pedaci, 2020).

REFERENCES

Allmer, T. (2018). 'Precarious, always-on- and flexible: A case study of academics as information workers', *European Journal of Communication*, 33, 4, 381-395.

Altheide, D. L., & Johnson, J. M. (1994). Criteria for assessing interpretive validity in qualitative research. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., 485-499). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Antonucci, L. (2018). 'Not all experiences of precarious work lead to precarity', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 21, 7, 888-904.

Arday, J. (2022). 'More to prove and more to lose': Race, racism and precarious employment in higher education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 43, 4, 513-533.

Bhandari, N., Batra, K., Upadhyay, S. and Cochran, C. (2021). Impact of COVD-19 on healthcare labour market in the United States', *International Journal of Environmental Research Public Health*, 18,8, 3894, 1-17.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2021). @What makes systemic racism systemic', *Sociological Inquiry*, 191, 3, 513-533.

Brammer, S., Branicki, L. and Linneluecke, M. (2023) 'Disrupting Management Research?', *British Journal of Management*, 34,1, 3-15.

Campbell, J. L., C. Quincy, J. Osserman, and O. K. Pedersen. (2013). Coding In-depth Semi-structured Interviews:. *Sociological Methods & Research* 42 (3): 294–320.

Castro, A. J. (2022). 'Teachers of colour and precarious work', *Labour Studies Journal*, 47, 4, 359-382.

Corley, Kevin, and Dennis Gioia. (2004). 'Identity Ambiguity and Change in the Wake of a Corporate Spin-Off'. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 49 (2). SAGE: Los Angeles, CA: 173–208.

Denzin, Norman. (1988). 'Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists.' JSTOR.

Escudero-Castillo, I, Mato-Diaz, F. J. And Rodriguez-Alverez, A. (2021). 'Furloughs, teleworking and other work situations during COVID-19 lockdown', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18, 2898.

Ferrer, I., Brotman, S. and Koehn, S. (2022). 'Unravelling the interconnections of immigration, precarious labour and racism across the life curse', *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 65, 8, 797-821.

Fevre, R. (2007). 'Employment insecurity and social theory', *Work, Employment and Society*, 21, 3, 517-535.

Glaser, Barney, and Anselm Strauss. (1967). '*Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Mill Valley'.

Green, F., Felstead, A., Gallie, D. and Henseke, G. (2016). 'Skills and work organization in Britain', *Journal of Labour Market Research*, 49, 121-132.

Hewison, K. (2016). Precarious work. In Edgell, S., Gottfried, H. and Granter, E. (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Sociology of Work and Employment*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 428-443.

Hlatshwayo, M. (2018). 'Precarious work and precarious resistance', *Diaspora Studies,* DOI: 10. 1080/09739572.2018.1485239.

Harris, L. C. and Ogbonna, E. (2016) 'Ethnic Gatekeeping on the Shop floor', *Work, Employment and Society*, 30 (1): 59-76.

Harrison, P., Collins, H and Bahor, A. (2022). 'We don't have the same opportunities as others': Shinning Bourdieu's lens on UK Roma migrants' precarious (workers') habitus', Work, *Employment and Society*, 36, 2, 217-234.

Ikeler, P. (2019). 'Precarity's prospect', *Critical Sociology,* 45, 4-5, 501-516.

International Labour Organization (2020). 'Young workers will be hit hard by COVID-19's economic fallout', https://www.ilo.org/employment/Informationresources/covid-19/other/WCMS_813690/lang--en/index.htm

Kalleberg, A.L. (2009). 'Precarious work, insecure workers', *American Sociological Review*, 74,1, 1-22.

Kalleberg, A.L. and Vallas, S.P. (2018). 'Probing precarious work, *Research in Sociology of Work*, 31, 1-30.

Keune, M. and Pedaci, M. (2020). 'Trade union strategies against precarious work: Common trends and sectoral divergence in the EU', *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 26, 2, 139-155.

Kreshpaj, B., Orellana, C., Burstrom, B., Davis, L., Hemmingsson, T., Johansson, G., Kjellberg, K., Jonsson, J., Wegman, D.H. and Bodin, T. (2020).'What is precarious employment?', *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment and Health*, 46,3, 235-247.

Lewchuk, W. (2017). 'Precarious jobs: Where are they and how do they affect well-being?' *Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 28, 402-419.

Lewchuk, W. and Dassinger, J. (2016). 'Precarious employment and precarious resistance', *Studies in Political Economy*, 97, 2, 143-158.

Lincoln, YS, and EG Guba. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry* Thousand Oaks'. Sage.

Merton, Robert K. (2008). *Focused Interview*. Simon and Schuster.

Ogbonna, E. (2019) 'The Uneasy Alliance of Organizational Culture and Equal Opportunities for Ethnic Minority Groups, *Human Resource Management Journal*, 29, 309-327.

Peticca-Harris, A., deGama, N. and Ravishankar, M. N. (2020). 'Postcapitalist precarious work and those in the 'drivers' seat', *Organization*, 27, 1, 36-59.

Strauss, Anselm, and Juliet Corbin. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Sage Publications, Inc.

TUC (2023). Number of BME Workers in Insecure Work has 'Boomed' Over Past Decade', https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/number-bme-workers-insecure-work-has-boomed-over-past-decade-tuc-warns (accessed on 15 February 2024)

Webster, E., Lambert, R. and Bezuidenhout, A. (2008). *Grounding Globalisation*, Oxford: Blackwell.