

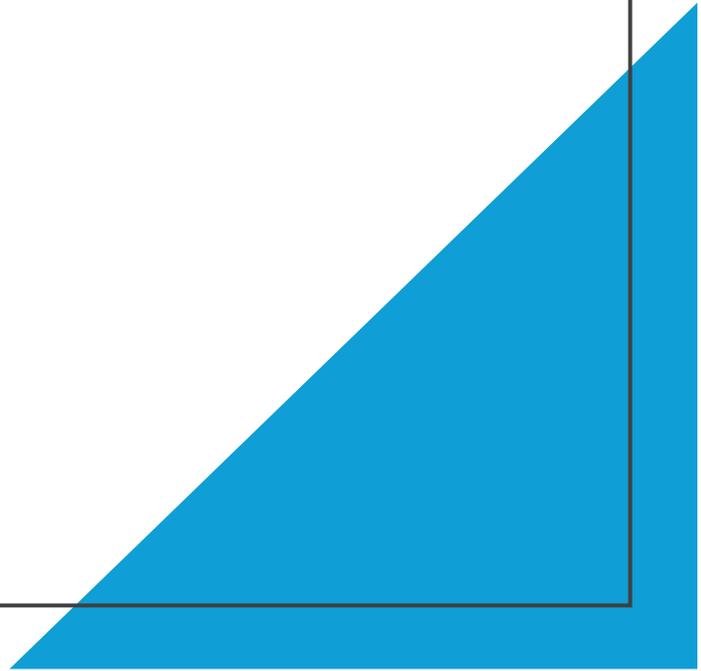
Young people and precarious work in England during the Covid-19 pandemic: a psychology of working perspective

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Manchester Metropolitan University



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Research: Young workers in Greater Manchester

Exploring young people's experiences of work and employment in an uncertain job market.

Research summary

<https://www.mmu.ac.uk/research/projects/young-people-job-insecurity>

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF WORK AND ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2025.2557314>

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Young people and precarious work in England during the Covid-19 pandemic: a psychology of working perspective

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ABSTRACT

Young people are disproportionately represented in precarious work and are particularly vulnerable to labour market shocks. This article explores the lived experiences of twenty-one young precarious workers in England during the Covid-19 pandemic. Employing a qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) design, repeat interviews were conducted in 2021 to examine how participants' needs were met within the context of precarious work and how they made meaning of their working lives. Reflexive thematic analysis was guided by the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT), with a focus on human needs. Findings explore the role of career adaptability, work volition, social support, and critical consciousness as malleable factors that can buffer young people against the adverse effects of precarity. Participants articulated diverse rationalizations of their work situations: dedication to precarious career; adapting to stopgap option; juggling trade-offs between work factors; and resigned disengagement. While they utilized resourceful, lifeworld strategies to meet their needs and demonstrated a clear awareness of labour market injustices, none engaged in collective or political action. The article concludes that while PWT concepts offer value in analysing precarity, the theory is less suited to illuminate the complex role of reflexivity in shaping worker subjectivities.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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KEYWORDS

Young people; precarious work; Covid-19; Psychology of Working; qualitative longitudinal research

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Decent Work and Productivity Research Centre

The impact of Covid-19 on Young Workers in England

Young people navigating insecure work in Greater Manchester during the Covid-19 pandemic

Authors

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April 2022

Aims of the research project

- To explore how young people experience and navigate precarious work.
 - To what extent are young people's needs met in the context of precarious work?
 - How do young people make meaning of precarious work?



Context of the project

- Young people are over-represented among precarious workers.
- They are vulnerable to long-lasting economic “scarring” if they do not find a secure pathway in the transition from education to the labour market (ILO, 2019).
- In the UK, they face multiple challenges including lower statutory minimum wage levels, fewer structured routes into employment, higher housing costs, and greater debt for education participation (Murray & Webster, 2022).
- The shock to the economy of the Covid-19 pandemic led to a shrinkage of the youth labour market, largely because young people were more likely to work in sectors that were hard-hit by “lockdowns” (e.g., hospitality, retail, and arts).
- In the UK between February 2020 and August 2021, Williams et al. (2021) report that young people (age 16–24 years) accounted for nearly half (46%) of the total fall in employment, with a total of 425,000 jobs lost.
- In a dramatic turnaround to these trends, the demand for graduate labour (component of the youth labour market) showed a rapid increase as the economy re-opened later in 2021 (AGCAS & Prospects, 2022).



Covid-19
amplified existing
concerns about
young people and
precarious work

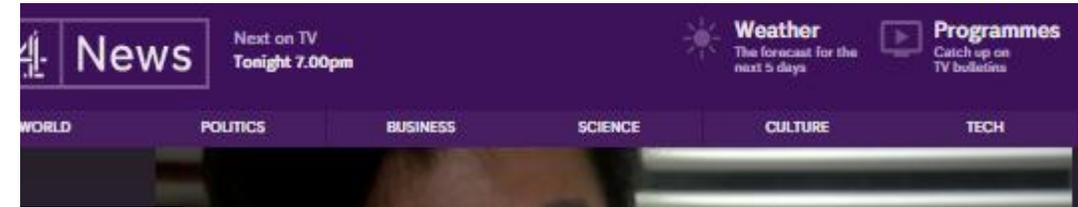
Covid-19 – victims, culprits, scapegoats

'This pandemic has left me with nothing job wise'

29 September 2020 | Business



"I feel as if this pandemic has truly left me with year old Jack Smith from North East Scotland.



18 Sep 2020

Fears 'lost generation' unemployment could top a million

By Paul McNamara

Batsleer and Duggan (2020)



Contrasting fortunes
of young people



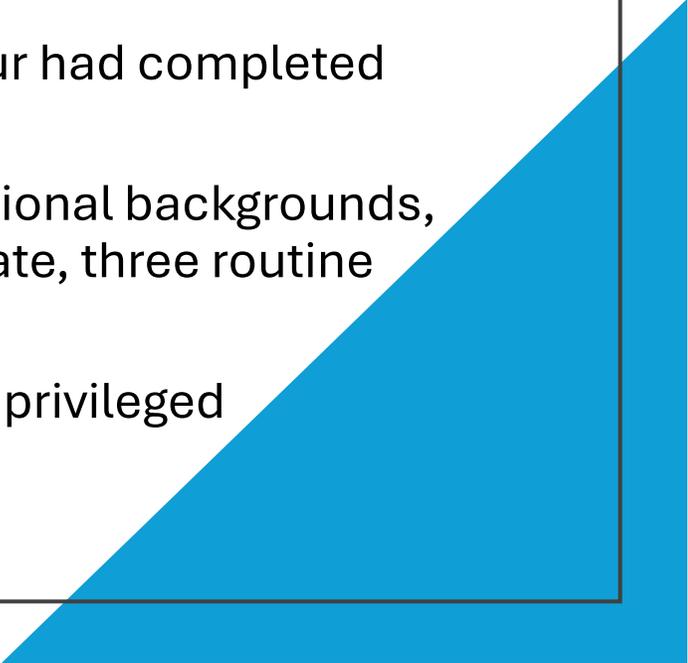
What we did?

Our participants

- Greater Manchester context
- Promotion to get participants targeted sectors known for their insecurity - accommodation and food'. 'retail' and 'arts, entertainment and recreation'
- Twenty one young people (18-30) interviewed twice in 2021. Wave A, Feb/March (n21). Wave B Aug/Sep (n19).



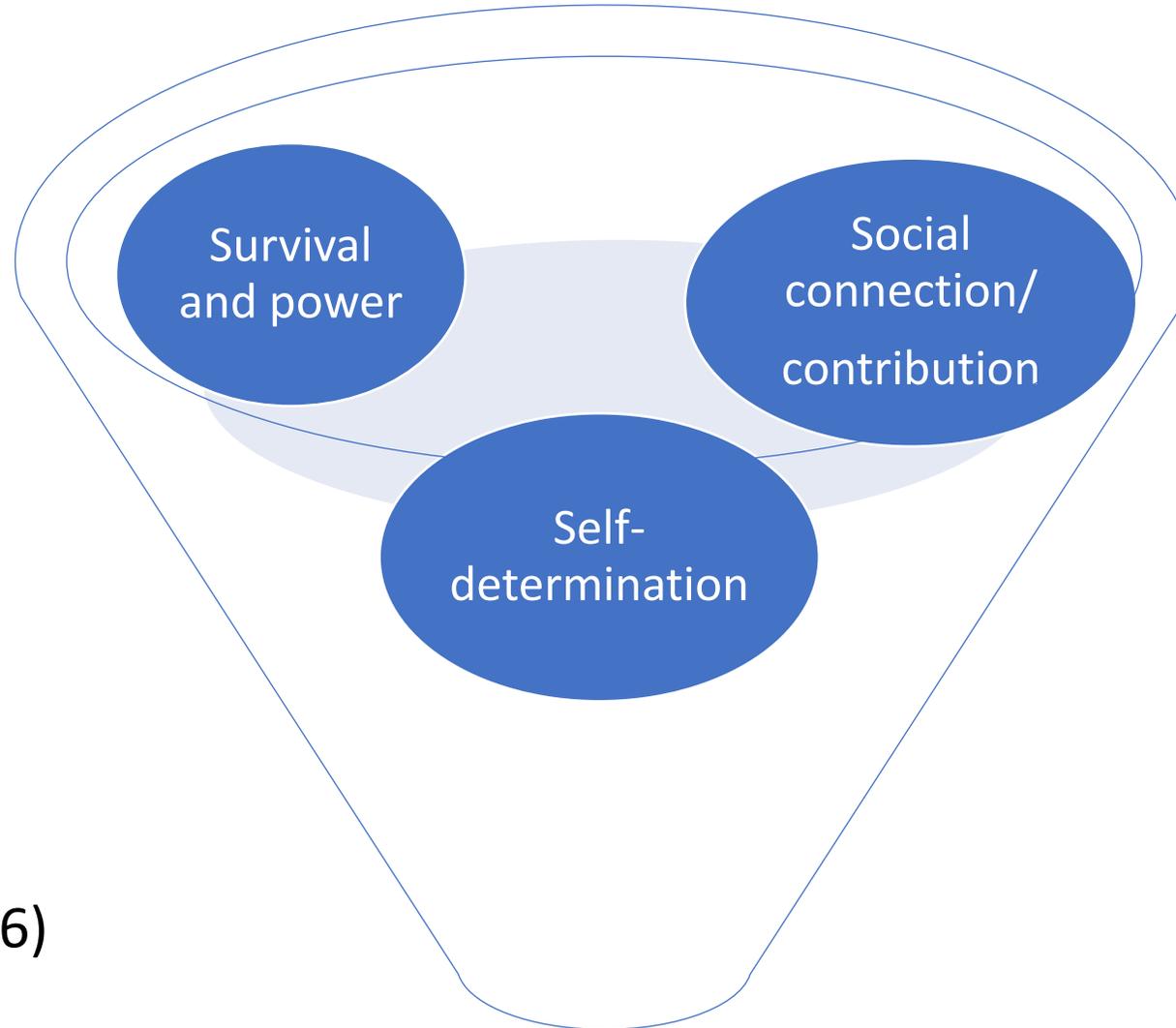
Our participants

- Twenty-one eligible volunteers participated in the first wave of interviews. Nineteen went on to participate in the second wave interview.
 - Most participants had a good level of education.
 - Eight were university graduates, nine were working students and four had completed secondary/further education.
 - Using UK defined NS-SEC (ONS, 2023) categories of family occupational backgrounds, ten were from managerial/professional backgrounds, six intermediate, three routine and manual, and one had a disabled parent who could not work.
 - The growth of precarity means it impacts even those from relatively privileged backgrounds; our participant group reflects
- 

Our lens to
explore topic:
**Psychology of
Working Theory**
– *what
contributes to
having decent
work* (Duffy et al, 2016)

- Four predictors of decent work (economic constraints; work volition; marginalization; career adaptability).
- Moderators to these predictors are economic conditions, proactive personality, critical consciousness, and social support.
- The outcomes of decent work are the fulfilment of economic and psychological needs, leading to work fulfilment and well-being.

Human
needs:
Work as a
means of.....



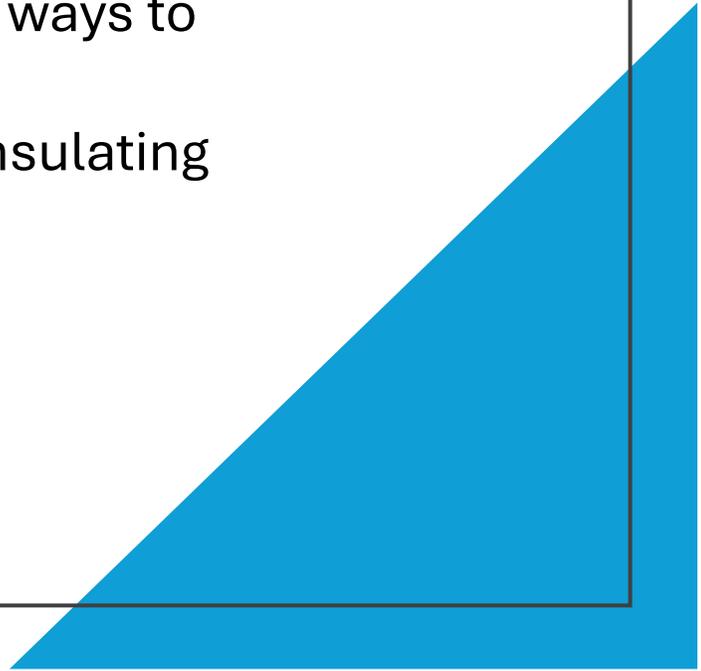
Psychology of working
taxonomy (Duffy et al, 2016)

Our findings



Career adaptability in uncertain times

- Concern and navigating unpredictable timescapes
- Control and possibilities for staying upbeat
- Curiosity and finding ways to grow
- Social support and insulating against uncertainty



‘Control’ and possibilities for staying upbeat

I’ve got like quite a lot of control for myself because . . . I know the road I want to go down . . . I don’t think the pandemic has impacted me too much in terms of future job prospects, it’s more of like opportunities now . . . Nina. (T2)

I’ve been a bit lucky with like this workplace and like a couple of previous workplaces where there have been very, like understanding if you need to take time off or it’s short notice and you take time off. I’ve definitely heard you know from people you know asking to take the time off and their boss is just kind of refusing or being a bit selfish about it. Amy T2

Social support insulating against uncertainty

My boss is like really nice. He always like checks in on me and like every time, cos it's not him that makes the overall decision for me to stay, it's like someone above him. So, he's like, always says to me, like at the end of the month when he has to let me know he's like-, I'm in a really sorry...and he's quite understanding cos he went through the same thing when he started the job.

Rosalind T1

They are terrifying and not people I would ever go to for advice. They sent me on a million courses but like none of those have come to fruition. It's been my own desire that's gotten me places.... if they are people who want to help, I feel like it's beaten out of them by these horrid rules and regulations that are just targeted attacks on poor people. Cherelle T2.

Work volition and crafting a career identity

- Dedication to precarious career
- Adapting to stopgap options
- Juggling trade-offs between work factors
- Resigned disengagement
- Limitations and possibilities for critical consciousness

Different rationalisations of precarity

... your persona and your self is so tied into your creations that . . . basically if you're told . . . "you can't do that anymore" . . . it's a very vulnerable place that you make art from so I think it's difficult . . . Simone. (T2)

The part-time Indian take-away job helps with income while I'm doing the hairdressing training which had to stop during lockdowns. Clara T1.

Different rationalisations of precarity

I am anti-work; I really mean it. Because I have not felt any kind of positive mental or emotional developments or physically . . . working doesn't enable me to feed myself properly . . . when I do have time off, I am exhausted . . . I would like to never work again.
Cherelle. (T2)

It's made me realise what I do want to do and what I don't want to do in work. I think I was struggling to work out where I wanted to be and sort of having it taken away made me realise, oh no that is what I want to do, that is where I want to be and I need to figure out how to get there... the Covid has happened in order for me to sort of realise. But yeah, I think for me it's been quite a positive change in my life. The teaching assistant job was secure but not what I want. Charlotte T2.



Limitations and possibilities for critical consciousness

- They do hire quite a lot of under 18s at work...they do get a lot of benefits from hiring younger kids' cos they must save so much money...it's like £4.50 for under 18s. If they hire a 16-year-old, they can work for them for two years for that much... Clara T1.
 - I was a member of the Musicians Union when I was in college, but that's cos it's a reduced fee. But since then, no cos it's really expensive to join and I dunno, I probably should but I just-, and I know a lot of people that don't and a lot of people that do but I personally am not part of that union. Simone T1.
 - I've weathered the storm quite well. . . I've had so many jobs and I always manage to find something new . . . I struggle to understand . . . people that say there's nothing out there. Adam. (T2)
-



Discussion points

- Malleable psycho-social concepts (work volition, career adaptability, social support and critical consciousness) can help insulate young people against the most adverse consequences of precarious work.
 - Improvisation to satisfy needs
 - Importance of individual and social resources – positive and negative
 - High levels of reflexivity notable.
 - Questions raised about ‘critical consciousness’ – how to foster helpfully
-



Implications for employability professionals

- Employability professionals should not shy away from more difficult issues faced by YP.
 - Potential benefits for YP and employability professionals of knowing more about employment rights.
 - Important buffering effect of social support provided by public employment services and careers services in education.
-

Characteristics of Good Employment



Pay



Secure Work



Engagement & Voice



Flexible Work



Recruitment



People Management



Health & Wellbeing

More sources

Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling
October 2024, Issue 53

Embedding the concept of Decent Work in career development learning

Article

10.20856/jnicec.5305

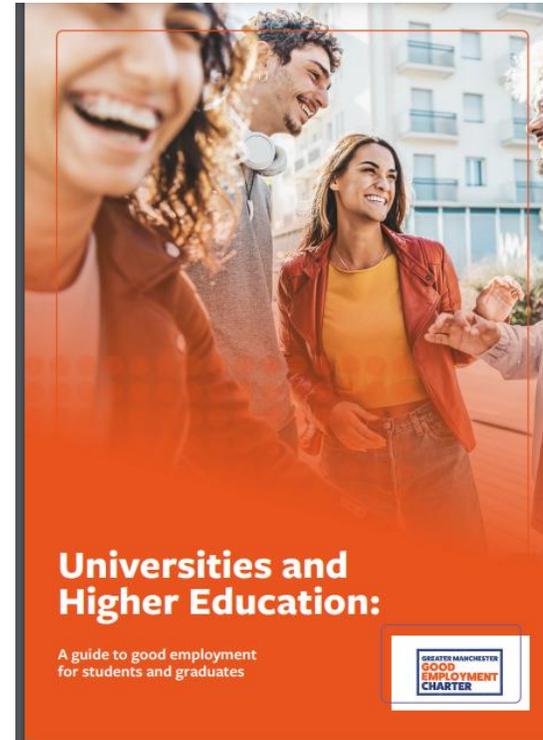
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<https://nicecjournal.co.uk/index.php/nc/article/view/485/455>



<https://www.gmgoodemploymentcharter.co.uk/resources-for-education/>



Thank you for listening

Any questions?

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