

“(IM)MOBILE PRECARITY”¹ AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

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Abstract: Mobility for work and education among young people has been a key feature of contemporary life. Drawing on focus groups with youth living in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as key informant interviews with people who work for community-based organizations that serve youth, I examine the relationship between young people’s employment- and education-related geographical mobilities and precarity. I draw on recent insights from scholars examining precarity as grounded in both labouring conditions and ontological experience. In foregrounding the experiences and subjectivities of poor and working-class youth, I show how the structure of youth labour markets and of education and training cheapens youth labour, with implications for youth’s capacity for independence. In a context of broader regimes of mobility associated with resource extraction, young people without formal qualifications live precarious lives: they move from job to job and place to place, and rely on family and friends to support their housing and other needs. In this context of uncertainty and labour market volatility, youth expressed disorientation regarding decisions about work, education, and mobility, reflecting the high stakes of not making the “right” choice, and developed a pragmatic approach to work as a way to make a living rather than a pathway to a meaningful life. I conclude by situating these findings as a critique not just of precarity but of capitalist economic arrangements more broadly, with implications for the kinds of solutions that can address structural class inequalities.

Keywords: mobility, precarity, youth, transitions, employment, education

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¹The term “(im)mobile precarity” is used by Martin et al. (2019) to describe the relationship between mobility and precarity.

Mobility for work and education among young people is certainly not new, but arguably has taken on new significance globally in the last couple of decades. Much of the youth studies literature, especially the literature in the Global North, makes sense of youth mobilities for work and education as a means to access and achieve autonomy and independence as part of the transition to adulthood (see Robertson et al., 2018 for a review). One argument is that young people become mobile in order to seek better educational and employment opportunities and outcomes. Another is that geographical mobility itself is evidence of cosmopolitan subjectivity, or is valued as a way to acquire it, since cosmopolitan subjectivity is preferred in today's global labour market (Skrbis et al., 2014). As Robertson et al. (2018) reminded us, “mobile transitions” are uneven, as the capacity for mobility or staying in place reflects diverse histories and intersectional oppressions. Furthermore, rather than being linear, “mobile transitions” and their consequences are complex, and may sometimes leave young people in more precarious positions. In the current context of high rates of unemployment and underemployment among youth in many parts of the world, and the overrepresentation of youth among the precariously employed (Furlong et al., 2017), the relationship between young people's mobility (including forced or limited mobility, as well as immobility) and precarity warrants attention. This is the problematic at the centre of this paper.

Drawing on focus groups with young people living in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as key informant interviews with people who work for community-based organizations that serve youth, I examine the relationship between young people's employment- and education-related geographical mobilities and precarity. Employment- and education-related geographical mobilities include spatial and temporal dynamics, and range from short daily commutes to extended stays in more distant places, to rotational work arrangements as well as seasonal and more permanent migration (see Temple Newhook et al., 2011). By drawing on recent scholarship that conceptualizes precarity in terms of the conditions of political economy and ontological experience, I address young people's “precarious labour and precarious life” (Millar, 2017, p. 5) in relation to their (im)mobility.

In the following paper, I first review some of the research and theorizing on youth transitions, mobilities, and precarity, and develop a conceptual framework that I use to interpret the focus group interviews. Second, I describe the research project and data used in the paper, and provide some background regarding young people's position in the political economy of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Third, I describe the findings under the headings of two main themes: paths to mobility and precarity, and mobile labouring subjects. I conclude with some thoughts about the findings in terms of broader conversations, oriented to social justice, regarding young people's mobilities, and offer some reflections on young people's mobility in a post-COVID world.

Transitions, Mobilities, and Precarity

Roberston et al. (2018) rightly pointed out that the youth transitions literature:

tends to account for mobility only as a means to improve education and employment prospects. Mobility is thus typically treated as a short-term strategy that enables youth to stay “on track” for a conventional pathway to secure work or a career. (p. 207)

In the context of uneven and exploitative conditions of capitalism associated with post-Fordist, post-Keynesian countries in the Global North since the 1970s, as well as in the Global South where insecurity and informal or unwaged work are common among labour (Millar, 2017), such outcomes — securing work or starting a career — will be difficult for some youth to achieve, and impossible for others. Political economy scholars have argued that in neoliberal capitalist economies, government and corporate practices (e.g., corporate lobbying to keep minimum wages low, government subsidies for employers to hire youth in low-waged and temporary positions) constitute youth as a form of cheap and precarious labour; combined with the need to acquire credentials for better-paying jobs, such practices result in young people’s ability to make a living and live independently being increasingly delayed (Côté, 2014). The precarity of young people’s employment is often justified — in some cases even desired — because it is framed as temporary (e.g., summer jobs) or stopgap (Tannock, 2001), and because youth are largely understood as dependent, either on the family or the state.

Research has shown how local and national economic conditions and limited labour markets serve as major drivers of young people’s intranational and international mobilities. Much of this research has focused on the intranational movement of youth from rural to urban or suburban places. Studies in Australia (Alston, 2004; Argent & Walmsley, 2008; Drozdowski 2008), Mexico (Howell, 2018), Nordic countries (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006), Canada (Corbett, 2005; Norman & Power, 2014), and the United Kingdom (Ní Laoire, 2001) have found that outmigration of youth is a response to limited educational, employment, and consumption options in rural places. In fact, the movement of youth away from rural places has been called a migration or mobility “imperative” (Corbett, 2005; Farrugia, 2016). This body of work has also found that rural to urban moves are gendered and classed (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006; Power & Norman, 2019). For example, employment in rural areas tends to be concentrated in male-dominated sectors, including resource extraction and agriculture, which favour young men and enable pathways for mobilities to other places with similar industries. In addition to limited job prospects, youth scholars point to a framing of rural places as “lacking”, and a privileging of urban and suburban spaces as sites of choice, opportunity, and success (Dodd, 2020; Nairn et al., 2003; Ní Laoire, 2001). The rural-to-urban mobility imperative and the discursive privileging of the urban mark those rural youth who stay as having failed, with consequences for their emotional well-being (Easthope & Gabriel, 2008; Ní Laoire, 2001; Power, 2017).

Other research has focused on how young people engage in international mobilities with the goal of acquiring skills, experiences, or status that will increase their employability, only to end

up in precarious employment. For example, Kawashima's study (2018) found that young skilled workers from Japan who migrate to China for temporary employment with hopes of enhancing their social mobility, end up working in low-paying jobs with few prospects of upward mobility. The precariousness of their employment and mobility is exacerbated by the uncertain regulatory context for mobile workers in China. Kawashima noted that while migrants may have experienced a temporary reprieve from some of the normative pressures to transition to adulthood, one of the longer-term consequences of their mobility is a sense of lagging behind. Similarly, Martin (2017) found that the Chinese women in her study who moved to Australia for school and work to enhance their employability experienced very limited employment opportunities due to anti-Asian discriminatory practices by local employers. The women students were, however, able to use their Chinese diasporic networks in Australia to access employment in restaurants or trade. In addition to the precarious character of this work, it created few opportunities to build the kinds of valued social and network capital that would increase their labour market success in the future.

Other research has focused on international employment programs that target young people, such as the international working holiday scheme (in Canada, International Experience Canada²). These schemes offer temporary employment opportunities to youth through bilateral agreements and are often marketed as ways to gain valuable international employment experience and to become a global citizen. Research shows, however, that the social mobility aspirations of young people on working holidays often conflict with their precarious working conditions in the host country (see Smith, this issue). This is also the case in Ho's (2019) study of Hong Kong youth on working holiday schemes in Australia. Ho found that working holidays appeal to young people's subjectivities that value mobility as a form of self-exploration and a means to access a meaningful life. However, rather than interpret this as evidence of a rejection of the normative transition to adulthood through paid work, Ho explained that the reality of the migrants' working conditions and the temporariness of the scheme produce a sense of resignation and acceptance about becoming labouring adult subjects. While research points to how these schemes tend to reproduce privilege among affluent youth travellers, Oommen's work (2017, 2021) in the United Kingdom suggests that because working holiday migrants are differentiated by gender, class, racialization, language, and nationality, "hierarchies of privilege" is a more useful description. These hierarchies, Oommen argued, are produced by policies that shape who has access to and can avail themselves of working holidays in ways that reproduce historical colonial relations.

Two important insights emerge from this literature. First, young people's aspirations of social mobility through geographical mobility are constrained by their working conditions. In other words, mobility and precarity are related, at least for some youth. Second, precarious work affects young people's subjectivities, their lives, and their future plans. Precarity, then, "encompasses both 'labour' and 'life'" (Strauss, 2018, p. 625). In making the case for blurring the political economy and political philosophy approaches to precarity, Strauss (2018) wrote, "life is inherently

²<https://www.cic.gc.ca/english/work/iec/eligibility.asp>

precarious, but human societies and economies are organized in ways that render some lives more precarious than others, often but not exclusively through the capitalist wage relation and the division of paid and unpaid labour” (p. 625). In a similar way, Millar (2017, p. 5) argued for a relational approach to understanding precarity as a labour condition and an ontological experience.

Mobility and immobility may produce or intensify precarity as both a labour condition and ontological experience, and precarity may drive or entrench certain kinds of mobilities and immobilities. Martin et al. (2019) referred to this relationship between mobility and precarity as “(im)mobile precarity”. The phrase is useful because it reminds us that precarity may be associated with both mobility and immobility, and that the form of this relationship varies across time, place, and political economies. While precarity has often been associated with the specific context of neoliberal capitalist regimes, scholarship in the Global South shows that precarious labour and life have long been features of colonial economic relations. To reflect diverse histories, Millar (2017) put forward “a method of inquiry” that examines “how precarious labor and precarious life intersect in particular times and places”. Echoing Millar’s method of inquiry, Martin et al. (2019) suggested mapping “paths to precarity” by attending to “local historical, cultural, economic and regulatory conditions that render lives precarious in specific contexts” (p. 901).

I draw on these insights to examine the relationship between young people’s employment- and education-related geographical mobilities and precarity. Foregrounding the lives of poor and working-class young people in Newfoundland and Labrador, I consider how local labour market conditions and employment-related geographical “regimes of mobility” (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013) shape young people’s (im)mobilities, and how their (im)mobilities in turn produce precarious lives. The concept “regimes of mobility” turns attention to the ways in which mobilities are managed, surveilled, and made possible (or not) within and across borders. Examining young people’s mobilities through the frame of precarity, I challenge reductive explanations of youth joblessness and job churn as a human capital problem and show how precarity can be both a precondition for and outcome of mobility for work and education. Young people’s subjectivities in relation to mobility, labouring, and adulthood reflect the structural insecurities of contemporary employment arrangements.

Research Project and Methods

In this paper, I draw on data collected for a research project with the On the Move Partnership³ (2012–2020) that examined the educational and employment-related geographical mobilities of young people in Newfoundland and Labrador. One of the projects included a collaboration with the Community Youth Network⁴ (CYN), which is funded by the provincial government and has 34 sites located across the province. The CYN’s mandate is to deliver services and programs to young people defined as at risk or living in poverty. While CYN services and programming broadly

³For more information on the On the Move Partnership research, see <http://www.onthemovepartnership.ca/>

⁴<https://www.gov.nl.ca/pep/community-youth-networks/>

focus on poverty reduction and facilitating access to education, training, and employment, local centres tend to tailor services to meet the needs of young people in the region they serve. Except for those communities with a school, the CYN site often provides the only physical space dedicated to youth programming in rural regions. The CYN targets young people between the ages of 12 and 18; however, I found that, in practice, staff delivered programming and services to older youth. For example, CYN executive directors interviewed for this study talked about delivering government-funded social programs that provided career training, waged employment, and financial support to unemployed youth between the ages of 18 and 30. In this paper, I draw on data from nine focus groups with 72 youth who participated in programming and services delivered by the CYN primarily in rural regions, as well as interviews with five CYN executive directors.

Young people's mobility for education and employment is not new in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. However, since the downsizing of the fishing industry and subsequent job losses in the early 1990s, youth outmigration from the province and from rural areas in particular, along with declining fertility rates, low rates of immigration, and an aging population have been identified as key problems by successive governments and policymakers (see Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2020; Simms & Greenwood, 2015). A recent government-commissioned report found that the majority of people who migrate from the province do so in search of employment (Goss Gilroy Inc., 2018).

The province is largely rural (Simms & Greenwood, 2015), which affects the character of local labour markets. The province has invested heavily in the extractive industries (e.g., mining, oil and gas, hydroelectric power) and in the training of young people in relevant trades to meet predicted demand in these sectors (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2009, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Skills Task Force, 2007). A recent Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives study (Shaker, 2014) of the state of young workers in Newfoundland and Labrador found the unemployment rate among youth in the province remains higher than the national rate at around 15%, and that college-educated and unskilled (completed high school and less) workers are more vulnerable to unemployment than their national counterparts (pp. 16–17). This is especially significant given that more workers in Newfoundland and Labrador have college diplomas compared to their counterparts in the rest of Canada. The study also found that outmigration has been levelling off, but other forms of mobility (e.g., rotational workers) across provincial borders are not captured in national statistics (Shaker, 2014, p. 13). This is supported by recent work by Lionais et al. (2020) suggesting that workers in the province were heavily dependent on mobile jobs in the construction and oil and gas industries in Alberta between the years 2006 to 2011.

Findings and Discussion

In this section I focus on two main themes that arose in the focus groups: paths to mobility and precarity, and mobile labouring subjects. By foregrounding the experiences of poor and working-class youth in a province that is highly dependent on mobile labour, I show how precarity can be

both a precondition for and an outcome of mobility for work and education. Finally I describe some of the ways that precarity shapes young people's subjectivities in relation to mobility, labouring, and adulthood.

Paths to Mobility and Precarity

In this section I describe three different relationships between mobility and precarity that emerged from the focus group discussions. The first focuses on young people's limited local mobility and employment options, and I pay particular attention to how government-funded social programs both produce jobs for youth, and cheapen youth labour, with implications for their capacity for independence. The second relationship focuses on the impact of mobility for education on work opportunities. Rural university students lacking social networks in the city returned to their home communities to work for the summer, while college students in apprenticeship programs had to incur the financial costs of multiple moves over the course of their programs to accommodate on-the-job training. Young people ended up working in a series of short-term jobs and incurring high debt loads to pay for their programs and associated mobility. The third relationship focuses on the expectation that young people will move away for work, and how their experiences of employment-related geographical mobility are shaped by broader regimes of mobility associated with resource extraction. Young people who lacked formal qualifications ended up living precarious lives, moving from job to job and place to place, and relying on family and friends to support their housing.

Local Labour Market for Youth

Across the focus groups with young people, there was a common theme — there were few employment opportunities for young people in their communities, especially in rural regions. The absence of a public transit system outside urban areas meant that rural youth who did not have access to a car (and a driver's licence) were limited to looking for employment close to home. The employment available to young people tended to consist of part-time and low-paying jobs in the service and sales sectors, or, in the case of rural youth, government-funded jobs delivered as part of social programs aimed at integrating youth into the workforce or supporting student summer employment. Focus group participants suggested that openings for new entrants into longer-term positions requiring training and credentials (e.g., teaching) were rare, and, as with other kinds of work, getting a job depended on knowing the right people. Those with experience in the service industry described their work as stressful — often fast-paced and requiring interactions with rude customers. At the same time, they reported receiving little or no training. As one youth responded when asked if she had received training in her job as a cashier:

Oh, definitely not. Like during my training it was just like mentioned, "There's going to be mean people and you're just going to have to deal with it."

Young people identified government-funded (federal and provincial) programs (e.g., Canada Summer Jobs⁵ program, Linkages⁶) as important sources of employment. In general, these programs fund or subsidize employers or not-for-profit organizations to hire youth, who are usually between the ages of 15 and 30. Some programs target particular groups of youth; for example, the provincially-funded Linkages program, in partnership with not-for-profit community-based organizations, focuses on supporting youth who “have not made a successful attachment to the labour force” (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, n.d.). Other programs target high school students who are university-bound and university students who return home for the summer; in fact, some of the programs paid students with tuition vouchers. While students talked about some of the “fun” aspects of this work (e.g., running sports activities, planning community festivals), these jobs often entailed busy work or seemed more like a string of odd jobs. As one participant put it:

No matter what student position you get, you do everything. Like if they — like if they calls us up and the town council is like, “Come do this”, well just go and do it. And then at jobs, you kind of got to be okay with doing everything that they want you to do, so you kind of learn to just do it. Not complain.

These youth employment programs are structured not only to provide opportunities to work, but to constitute youth as a form of cheap and precarious labour for local employers and not-for-profits that in turn receive wage subsidies. The employment associated with these programs is inherently temporary, and, like the part-time work in the sales and service sector, does not provide a living wage. The example of tuition vouchers as deferred payment points to an assumption that the young people had other sources of support, either family or the state, in turn reproducing their financial dependency.

Impact of Mobility for Education on Work Opportunities

Congruent with research on rural youth elsewhere, young people who participated in this research largely anticipated that at a certain point — usually marked by completing high school — they would become mobile, even if only temporarily, to pursue education and employment opportunities:

I think there are only a couple from my class that graduated out of 36 people that actually stayed here. Like there might be like five or six of us, if that.

Mobility for education influenced young people’s employment options. There is only one university in the province, with the main campus located in the capital city. For rural youth, attending university in the province or elsewhere requires leaving one’s community for a city; over the summer period, staying in or leaving the city depends on finding work. In the focus groups,

⁵<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/funding/canada-summer-jobs.html>

⁶<https://www.gov.nl.ca/ipgs/students/linkages/>

university students reported finding jobs in sales, as wait staff, or as personal support workers, during the school year as well as over the summer break. However, rural students also reported returning to their home communities for summer employment. Those who were relatively new to the city and lacked social networks reported being largely unsuccessful in their attempts to gain employment in the city. In this quotation, a young woman describes her unsuccessful attempts to apply for work:

Well, I find in town there's a lot of students and everyone is looking for part-time jobs like when they're not at school ... and for just a random sales associate position, part-time, there was 142 people who had already applied to that job, and I was like this is kind of difficult. And I've already — I think I've already applied for at least like 30 different jobs and I haven't heard anything yet. And it's already been like two months. But kind of trying to wait it out, see what happens.

College programs are decentralized and offered in different locations across the province, meaning that where young people go for training depends in part on where a particular program is being delivered. For skilled trades programs, mobility is built into the apprenticeship structure, with students moving between periods of classroom instruction and on-the-job training. This structure means that, over the course of their program, apprentices commute or temporarily relocate multiple times to attend school and to find employment (Power, 2017). The province has also developed agreements with other provinces that make it easier for apprentices to work across provincial borders to fulfil training requirements. For some, mobility associated with apprenticeships, especially mobility out of province, has meant incurring substantial debt loads over the course of their training. This situation is especially problematic for those who are unable to find longer-term employment in their field, as this young man explained:

... now I'm jobless, can't find a job, and I'm \$25,000 in debt [pursuing trades training], and I haven't paid my debt since I moved here.

As found in other studies, a lack of employment and educational opportunities can be a precondition for mobility for education. However, focus groups with young people also show how moving for education shapes their options for work, and often entails additional forms of mobility. Rural students in the focus groups who lacked social support or networks in the city to help with finding employment returned to their communities. Although there are some financial supports to assist students, young people and their families largely carried the costs of these moves.

Mobility for Employment

As with education, the focus group participants expected to be mobile for work, and among rural youth, there was an expectation that such mobility meant moving to a city:

I feel like going more towards the city sort of area or even going to a suburban area working out of home. Like I feel like that would be better just because there's more opportunities, but in Newfoundland, I don't really see much.

Here, the young participant pointed to both a lack of opportunities in rural communities, and indeed the province more generally, but also indicated that there was something “better” in urban and suburban places. This expectation cannot be separated from broader “regimes of mobility” that characterize normal, everyday life in the province. Young people live and work in regions where commuting long distances intraprovincially and “working away” as rotational workers in other provinces, usually in the oil and gas industry, are common. This mobile employment arrangement is becoming the norm in resource extraction industries in Canada and elsewhere (Dorow & Mandizadza, 2018; Storey, 2016). Some of the young people in the focus groups described their own experiences moving away for work, especially for periods in the summertime. And, while some young people in the group discussions earned “big money” working away, especially those with sought-after credentials in a skilled trade, others described their employment as short term, low-paying, and without benefits. This was the case for those young people who moved to provinces such as Alberta chasing the oil boom, but lacked formal or in-demand qualifications or credentials and were therefore relegated to “unskilled” work. For example, Bob moved to Edmonton in hopes of securing better employment, but found only low-wage work, leaving him unable to pay rent, and with little money to buy food and other necessities:

\$700 every two weeks does not pay for your apartment when it’s \$800 a month. So you’re not going to have enough for rent. You’re not going to have enough for food or toiletries. So before you even buy the apartment, you have to buy your food for the first month and your toiletries for the first month, so that way you still have enough to eat. That’s what I was doing in Edmonton at least.

This is illustrative of the way precarious mobile employment enacts a precarious life — compromising housing and food security. The risks and costs associated with precarious mobile employment and structural job churn are downloaded onto young people and their families. Alex, a young woman whose employment history took her from rural Newfoundland and Labrador to Alberta, lived with family at first while she worked in a string of low-paying jobs in the service sector because she could not afford a place of her own. While in Alberta, she met her current boyfriend, and they both moved back to the province of Newfoundland and Labrador after losing their jobs in the oil downturn. At the time of the focus groups, she was working in yet another temporary job and planned to move back to Alberta with her boyfriend when the contract expired. Alex was paying her own way back and forth, and her family in Newfoundland and Labrador in Alberta supported her housing.

Well, the only way I got there is because I have family up there. Like my mom’s sister was there and I lived with her, and then I went on my own, and then I met my boyfriend. Then we moved back here, and now we’re going to move back as soon as I’m done this job.... We moved back home because I’m sure everybody knows how Alberta is right now. It’s like just dead, so we kind of had no choice really.

Alex's case, while not unusual, is instructive in that it demonstrates how broader networks — in this case family located both in her home province and in Alberta — facilitated her movement (see Earle & Power, 2017). It is also a reminder that, despite the rhetoric, not all of the mobility associated with resource extraction leads to high-paying jobs. Young people's aspirations of social mobility through geographical mobility are constrained by their working conditions and by labour market volatility. Young people navigate these conditions by moving from job to job and from place to place and relying on family and friends to support their housing, as the precarious work makes living independently next to impossible. In the next section, I explore the impact of such (im)mobile precarity on labouring ontologies.

Mobile Labouring Subjects

In this section I describe two of the ways that precarity shaped focus group participants' subjectivities in relation to mobility, labouring, and adulthood. First, young people experienced a sense of disorientation on having to make educational, employment, and mobility choices in the context of labour market volatility. Their delay or uncertainty regarding which type of training or employment to pursue did not reflect a desire to engage in some of kind self-discovery but rather the high stakes of not getting it right. Second, young people took a very pragmatic approach to work. In the context of repeated and unsuccessful attempts to get work, the focus turns to getting any job, at home or away. Work is not seen as contributing to a meaningful life, but as a means to an end, a way to make sufficient money to avoid a precarious life.

Disorientation in the Context of (Im)Mobile Precarity

Political economy approaches to youth employment have shown how the current mode of global capitalism has disrupted school-to-work transitions and constitutes youth as a form of cheap and precarious labour, in turn delaying young people's transition to independence, financially and otherwise (Côté, 2014). In contrast to notions of "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2000) that interpret delays in educational choices or entry into employment as a matter of individual choice allowing a time of self-discovery, Côté and Bynner (2008), among others, have focused attention on the ways in which young people continue to be constrained by structural features of society, such as class and gender, and by exploitative capitalist relations. For example, focus group discussions illustrated a kind of disorientation in the context of having to make educational, employment, and mobility choices. Rather than articulating freedom to make choices or to take time to discover more about themselves, focus group participants talked predominantly about not knowing what to do or where to go. As one young man put it: "I just didn't know what I wanted to do in school, so I just went up away and worked." As a number of participants pointed out, it is not easy to find the "right" educational or training program or the "right" job or the "right" region (see Earle and Power, 2017; Power, 2017). For example, since the release of the Skills Task Force Report (2007), the provincial government of Newfoundland and Labrador, along with school counsellors and family members, have encouraged youth to pursue skilled trades training to meet the labour demand predicted to result from investment in the development of megaresource extraction projects. However, the jobs associated with resource extraction have been hit hard in recent years

by the volatility of global commodity markets, especially for oil and gas, and this has left young people skeptical about the advice to pursue trades:

Like, a lot of people in the community, they were all like pressured into doing trades back in the day because that was like the big thing back in the day, was to do a trade and go make lots of money, right?

There is good reason for youth to be skeptical, as reports have emerged about the difficulty skilled trades apprentices in Newfoundland and Labrador have experienced in finding work (Power, 2017). The volatility of employment associated with resource extraction (see Barber & Breslin, 2020) means that investing in skilled trades credentials is risky, though the chance of making “lots of money” may make it worthwhile. The risk is not limited to training and jobs for the extractive industries, as Jacky explained:

Like, one year — I used to want to do hairstyling. And that was like my long term goal. It was like, I don't really have to go back, you know, and finish my high school. But I decided to come here, and by the time I got ... I would keep like an eye on all the listings for different kinds of jobs for when I was done school, and it was like a huge wave of every place wanted a hairstylist. And now it's like another job that I really want to do is childcare. And now it's like everyone is wanting childcare workers and everything. And so within like next year or the year after, you don't really know if the job that you want is available or not.

In this case, pursuing a job in a feminized industry may carry even greater risks given the increased likelihood of precarious working conditions. Regardless of their particular choices, poor and working-class young people, and sometimes their families, carried the costs of training. In the context of labour market volatility, the stakes are high: if young people make the “wrong” choice, their ability to make a living and live independently are put in jeopardy.

Some participants who had experienced longer-term unemployment took part in programming aimed at integrating them into the local labour market. They received instruction on how to make these important educational and employment choices. Jacob explained:

So for the first three meetings, we sat down and we went through all the questions and we looked at all the possible jobs, and it really, it gives you so many different options. That was how I came across a couple of the things that I was thinking about doing. And then we discuss them with the coordinator and she talks about like how you can go about applying for those things and all that. So those are — I found those really helpful.

Here, Jacob described how this program helped to identify “all the possible jobs” and how the participants in the program could get these jobs. The assumption is that, rather than a labour market problem, there is a human capital problem or a skills mismatch between the qualifications of youth and local employment opportunities, and that addressing individual worker deficits will resolve the problem of youth unemployment (Lysenko & Vodden, 2011). Like other youth employment

programs, this particular initiative provides young people access to temporary work through employer subsidies, which serves to further entrench precarity in the local labour market.

Pragmatic Subjectivities

The literature on post-Fordist work has shown how immaterial and affective forms of production demand “an intensification of the requirement to construct the self in relation to the requirements of the labour force, precisely as the structural conditions underpinning employment are becoming more precarious” (Farrugia, 2019, p. 711). To put it another way, work is not separate from other parts of one’s life; rather, work offers a pathway to a meaningful life. Other research has focused on the rise of aspirational labour, which entails the intentional production of the entrepreneurial self by doing what you love with the goal of one day making a living from the work, a goal that is rarely realised (Duffy, 2016). The focus group discussions with poor and working class young people in Newfoundland and Labrador expressed a different relationship to work. In the context of weak local labour markets for youth, and employment-related geographical mobility regimes dependent on volatile resource extractive industries, finding a job is what matters, not self-realization or investing in one’s passion. To be clear, young people in the focus groups did articulate passion: some were passionate about politics, others art, and so on. However, passion was not the primary way they related to work. They needed paid work to get by, to make a living; a job was a means to an end. Some youth became increasingly desperate the longer they were without work. For them, just getting a job — any job — was the goal, and as a result, they applied for almost every job that became available:

And I have like put over 30 different resumes in that area where the [name of drugstore chain] is and where the [name of hardware store chain] is and all that stuff. Yeah. I’ve put at least 30 or 40 resumes down there, and no one has gotten back to me. So ...

Like the working-class youth in Farrugia’s work (2019), the constant rejection experienced by youth impacted their sense of worth, and it was difficult for them not to see the problem as some deficiency in themselves, affecting their confidence and emotional well-being:

Trying to, but can’t even get like a minimum wage job. I don’t know why.... I had interviews, but I don’t know. Maybe it’s me.

In this context of uncertainty, it makes sense that some youth prioritized making money over the content of a job. As one participant put it, “I’m not really figured out entirely, but I just want to make a lot of money. But like have fun while I’m doing it.” The focus on money encouraged a sort of pragmatism regarding mobility. Some, like Brittany, a skilled trades worker, considered her mobility options by figuring out the financial difference between staying home to work full time and working as a rotational worker “out west”:

I don’t care. I’ll pick up and go tomorrow. A trades job is a trade. But now then again, I’m not going somewhere for \$17 an hour and you got to pay your own

flights. It's just as well for me to stay home with a full-time job. Have to pack up everything, leave, fly up there, wherever.

In this example, Brittany is willing to work on rotation, provided the costs of her mobility are covered by the employer, and her wages are greater than what she could make by living and working at home.

There has been a great deal of public interest and talk regarding the “big money” earned by rotational workers employed in the oil and gas sector (see Barber & Breslin, 2020). Rather than dismiss the prioritization of earning money as reflecting a generation that is selfish and greedy — a popular interpretation and one that carries moralistic overtones — or some kind of economic rationality, I suggest that a focus on making money makes sense in relation to the expectation and experience of precarious employment. It makes sense to get what you can, wherever and as quickly as you can, if high-paying jobs are rare, and come and go. In this sense, young people's labouring subjectivities reflected a willingness to be mobile to make “big money” and a prioritization of other ways to achieve a meaningful life, such as through their place-based attachments.

For others in the focus group discussions, attachment to their community outweighed investment in career goals and passions. Some participants expressed a willingness to change career goals to accommodate local labour market opportunities as a way to build a meaningful life in their community (see Earle & Power, 2017). For example, Olive talked about changing her career goals (from teaching to dental hygienist) to secure employment in her community; that is, to secure work and to have a less precarious life — and in this case a less mobile life:

I was going to do teaching at first. That's what I really wanted to do. Then I was thinking about it and ... like I probably won't get a job and I really, really want to. So I was talking to my dentist here in [community name], and she said that if she knew that she was going to have a hygienist waiting, then she would stay here and the job is open and everything for me.

Olive is not articulating a passion for her choice of work, nor does she see this work choice as a reflection of who she is or wants to be. Instead, her work choice, however constrained, is a pathway to make a meaningful life in her community. This case is an example of a young person privileging her attachment to community, rather than investing in her preferred career. There is a robust literature documenting young people's attachment to place, especially rural places, and the ambivalent emotions associated with the processes of staying and leaving, especially when certain (im)mobilities are widely associated with success or failure (Easthope & Gabriel, 2008; Ní Laoire, 2001; Power, 2017). However, this example shifts the focus away from ambivalent emotional attachments to place and toward how such attachments impact young people's labouring subjectivities, lives, and future plans.

Conclusion

In foregrounding the work and mobile experiences of poor and working-class young people in Newfoundland and Labrador, I have shown how local labour market conditions and broader mobility regimes centred around resource extraction shape young people's (im)mobilities, how their (im)mobilities in turn produce precarious lives, and how precarity shapes young people's subjectivities in relation to mobility, labouring, and adulthood. In doing so, I have tried to push back against simplistic, adultist, and damaging accounts of young generations — those depicting them as self-interested, greedy, and as choosing to delay the transition to adulthood in order to leisurely pursue pathways of personal growth. One of the risks of focusing on youth experiences of mobilities is that of prioritizing economic rationalities and individual choice; however, foregrounding the experiences of poor and working-class youth illustrates how the organization of capitalist economies renders “some lives more precarious than others” (Strauss, 2018, p. 625). Their experiences of precarity and mobility point to structural features of life (e.g., class) that make certain paths possible and discourage others, as they navigate educational, employment, and mobility decisions, and deal with the consequences.

Scholars (Berlant, 2011; Millar, 2017; Weeks, 2011) warn that critiques of precarity should not fall into the trap of calling for a return to some golden age of the standard employment relationship, which was in fact a historical anomaly in the Global North that privileged certain groups of people, including men and White people. Millar (2017, p. 6) wrote, “The very condition of having to depend on a wage to sustain one's life is what makes a worker precarious — not just the specific structures of this or that job.” Conceptualizing precarity in this way mitigates a tendency to offer “solutions” that strengthen capitalist economic arrangements and employment relations, which would ultimately have damaging effects. Instead, perhaps we should look to examples of new possibilities of redistribution (e.g., guaranteed annual income), and other ways to loosen the relation between income and work, which would also open up new ways of thinking about youth transitions to adulthood. The research described in this paper was conducted prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic. However, the dire consequences of the pandemic on young lives only increase the pressure to act. Youth have been hit disproportionately hard by the economic downturn and the disruption of schooling associated with the pandemic. Because young people are overrepresented in the service industries, they have been subject to higher rates of job loss or to classification as essential frontline workers. The pandemic has laid bare the consequences of social inequality. There have thus been renewed calls to strengthen social programs and to rethink capitalist economic arrangements. Without appropriate intervention, the consequences of the pandemic on youth will be long lasting (Stanford, 2021).

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