Sensemaking as 'Self'-defence: Investigating Spaces of Resistance in Precarious Work

The plight of workers inhabiting the lowest strata of the occupational hierarchy, their scope for progressive resistance and collectivisation is a topic of lasting significance, addressed in a number of seminal studies. Since the advent of neoliberalism and rise of precarious, that is, insecure, atypical, zero-hour, short-term and temporary employment, the matter has, once again captured public attention and led to debates between labour market theorists and policy makers. Researchers have, so far, considered the complex neoliberal causes behind the phenomenon of precarious work and mapped in detail the antagonistic relationship between labour and capital in a variety of organisational contexts. However, there is an ongoing need to study worker resistance at the micro and symbolic levels, exhibited not only through mundane, covert and everyday behaviours but through identity work in defending against subjugation of a worker's 'Self'. Applying Weick's (1995) framework in 71 in-depth interviews with workers in low-pay and low-skill industries such as hospitality and care, I identify three types of narratives, retrospective, collective and appreciative, through which participants practice sensemaking as 'Self'-defence. In doing so, I propose that sensemaking narratives enable participants to orient and interpret the atomised terrain of postmodern work, finding both enjoyment and fulfillment. Through this argument, I contribute to the subjectivity debate by showing that 'soft' forms of resistance should not be dismissed as harmless substitutes of the real deal but underscore precarious workers' lasting ability to construct meaningful 'Selves' within postmodern working contexts.

Keywords: precarious work; resistance, sensemaking, subjectivity, labour process

Introduction

There is a growing body of literature studying the agenda, experiences and scope for resistance of workers in the proposed (Savage et al., 2013; Standing, 2011) precarious proletariat, or 'precariat'. The plight of precarious workers is typically presumed to be desperate, on account of the insecure, short-term, non-standard employment (International Labour Organization, 2016), contingent and atypical (Vosko, 2010), freelance, temporary and undocumented working conditions (Lunning, 2010; Moore et al., 2018) in which they find themselves. The inherent precarity of the labour process has been debated on the pages of Competition & Change (Braedley, 2015; Tartanoğlu, 2018) and more widely, generating studies adhering to orthodox labour process theory (Heery and Salmon, 2002; Kalleberg, 2012; 2013; Lee and Kofman, 2012; Nixon, 2009; Umney and Kretsos, 2015), as well as transcending the duality of labour-capital antagonism (Contu, 2008; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001; 2001; 2009; Spicer and Böhm, 2007). In turn, those studies have built on a well-established foundation of neoliberal and labour process critique, represented in seminal studies by Braverman (1998), Burawoy (1979), Boyer (1987), Sennett (1998), Beck (2000) and Bauman (2000).

Shaped by neoliberalism (Greer, 2016) and responsibility-shifting from Governments, to individuals as 'good neoliberal subjects' (Gray, 2009; Schram, 2015; Siltaoja et al., 2015), precarious contexts are viewed in unequivocally negative terms, and exacerbated by emerging trends alternatively termed as 'flexibilisation', 'casualisation', 'Uberisation' and the 'gig-economy' (Friedman, 2014; Graham et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2018). Precarious work exposes workers not only to physical exploitation and subordination (Armano et al., 2017), but also to technology-enabled management techniques of 'identity regulation' (Alvesson et al., 2008; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) which secure compliance, while removing any resistance and opposition to organisational goals (Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Thomas and Davies, 2005).

Despite nuanced differences in the above arguments, they can be placed within the 'orthodox' school of structuralist labour process analysis, built on Braverman's *Labour*

and Monopoly Capital, both celebrated and critiqued since its publication in 1974 (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2000). Such a reading suggests that the weakened economic position of workers (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001) railroads a range of negative experiences, and causes a 'layering' of insecurity (Lewis et al., 2015; Lewis et al., 2015a; Sverke et al., 2002; Sverke and Hellgren, 2002; Waite et al., 2013). Workers are left to bear the burden of 'responsibilisation' (Schram, 2015; Siltaoja et al., 2015) for their life and employment choices while facing reduced scope for resistance, progression and skill acquisition (Spencer, 2000). Given the wider turbulence (Bauman, 2000), atomisation and risk (Beck, 2000) of neoliberal terrains, as well as the flexibility and uncertainty of postmodern workplaces (Sennett, 1998) this alienates precarious workers (Standing, 2011), corroding both their character, and sense of 'Self' (Sennett, 1998; Tweedie, 2013; Webb, 2004).

The impact of precarious conditions on worker experiences is, however, neither uniform, nor fully negative (Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013; Standing, 2014). Accordingly, worker experiences can be contingent on labour market and social factors (Vosko, 2010), worker control over skills development (Kalleberg, 2003); desired future outcome (Hardgrove et al., 2015) and ability to exit (Alberti, 2014) their current position. Sociologist Anthony Giddens further proposes that, rather than leading to a 'corroded Self', flexible modern work provides choice, career pathways and opportunities, at least, for some (Webb, 2004). In his investigation of the labour process Burawoy (1979) also suggests that, in conditions of advanced capitalism, low-pay and low-skill workers can 'gamify' their labour. Although this stifles resistance against the labour process since a worker cannot both play the game (participate in the labour process) and question (resist and challenge) its rules (Burawoy, 2012), it also provides enjoyment by alleviating the boredom of monotonous or laborious tasks.

These arguments can be situated within a broader, 'poststructuralist' position in the labour process literature which seeks to locate the 'missing subject' (Burawoy, 2012), which Braverman's (1998) critique has sidelined (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001). This is, also, the proposition that focusing on 'subjectivity' can account for the continued capacity

of workers to find enjoyment in work (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2009; Sosteric, 1996) as well as defy capitalist exploitation through a variety of 'Self'-defence practices and 'everyday resistance' (Scott, 1985). This might lead to the conclusion that the precarious 'subject' is not a hapless and exploited 'victim of circumstance', after all. Nevertheless, there are critical voices in the literature who warn against the premature celebration of worker agency and abandonment of labour process theory (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001). In this sense, positive experiences in precarious contexts are generally disregarded as 'satisficing', that is, instrumental behaviours based on the viewing of work as a 'means-to-an-end' (Standing, 2011). Moore et al. (2018) go further by suggesting that although choice can 'shape' workers' career paths, it cannot create opportunities, while Contu (2008) dismisses the practice of covert, everyday worker resistance as harmlessly 'carnivalesque', indeed, a 'decaf' alternative to the 'real thing'.

These considerations suggest the need to better understand how workers navigate the uncertainty of precarious contexts and make sense of their own experiences, while avoiding reductive conceptualisation of the labour-capital relationship as purely antagonistic or 'schizophrenically' dualistic (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2009; Thomas and Davies, 2005). In line with this, I propose that worker interpretation of precarious contexts and own experiences can be viewed as an ongoing, reflexive, and subjective process of 'sensemaking' (Weick, 1995:4). It is a process driven by neoliberal uncertainty and insecurity (Beck, 2000; Young, 2011), requiring workers to create 'stories' in order to anchor themselves in the messy and complex reality of the present (Alvesson et al., 2008; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Thomas and Davies, 2005). This makes sensemaking both an active process of Self-hood creation (Sennett, 1998:133), and one which accounts for workers' engagement with, and participation in their precarious contexts (Weick, 1995:5-9). In turn, adopting a sensemaking lens offers conceptual utility in being able to accommodate the multiplicity of contexts, clashes and interests within the relations of production from within a wider, poststructuralist perspective (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2009; 2001).

I structure the rest of the article as follows. First, I provide an overview of the nascent literature on precarious work, distinguishing between the exploitative reality of precarity contexts, and corresponding subjective experiences. Then, I discuss the utility of Weick's (1995) sensemaking framework in understanding how workers interpret their experiences within precarious contexts. Next, I consider research method and findings, outlining three stories through which workers construct their working experiences and practice 'Self'-defence against managerial control. I conclude, by discussing the study's contribution and implications for future research.

Literature Review

A Structuralist Analysis of Precarious Work

Experienced by a growing body of workers and leading to multiple insecurities, precarious work has had a de-skilling impact on labour, reducing access to meaningful levels of pay, progression, health and safety legislation, protection from harm and so on (Bourdieu, 1998; Fevre, 2007; Gilmore et al., 2018; International Labour Office, 2016; Prosser, 2016; Standing, 2011). Going beyond the detrimental impact on the working experience, precarious contexts are also an arena of alienation, underscored by the 'inhumanity of capital' and obscured by 'adjustment' activities such as job enrichment workplace schemes (Spencer, 2000; Braverman, 1998). This objective reality of capitalist contexts, for Braverman (1998), cannot be ignored or replaced with arguments for worker satisfaction since it reflects the (precarious) nature of work under capitalist and not the subjectivity of worker experiences.

Accordingly, such a 'structuralist' reading views the precarious worker as a 'passive' and 'victimised' recipient, rather than an active participant in the labour process (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001; 2000). Furthermore, precarity is presented as a wider, systemic condition. It is the by-product of capitalist control mechanisms, and management techniques aimed at subjugating the worker and extracting the required surplus value from his or her labour (Braverman, 1998; O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001).

This is how precarity is manifest in the absence of contractual and representational security for the worker, reduced ability to access training and develop niche skills, in order to progress his/her career and achieve a meaningful wage (Potter and Hamilton, 2014; Standing, 2014). Precarious employment is also contingent on a less-than-favourable employment status (for instance, self-employment rather than employment with its contractual benefits), type of employment (temporary, part-time, flexible rather than full-time) and/or social context (lower-skilled occupations, industries or peripheral geographic regions) (Kalleberg, 2013; 2012; 2003; Moore et al., 2018; Vosko, 2010). Additionally, the precarious work model comprises 'low levels of employee control over wages, hours and working conditions' (Campbell and Price, 2016:320) on account of reduced task control and unpredictable employer scheduling.

The precarity of contexts appears to be propagated by the introduction of 'flexicurity' provisions and 'responsibilisation' practices, aimed at increasing worker participation in labour markets while shifting the risks, costs and accountability onto the workers themselves (Gray, 2009; Schram, 2015). Thus, 'flexicurity' is the weakening of worker protection, and matching contractual provisions to flexible employer needs, improving the latter's competitive capability. Emerging as a result of the blurring of social, market and state boundaries in the wake of neoliberalism, 'responsibilisation' discourses view individuals as responsible for increasing their personal capital to maintain labour market participation, while remaining in personally compliant with their overarching economic structures (Schram, 2015; Siltaoja et al., 2015). In turn, austerity measures following the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007-2010, intensified in the UK and US on account of the market-based model, further weakened labour market participation and led to a 25-year unemployment peak for OECD states (Duca, 2014; Lallement, 2011). Additionally, a gradual shift in traditional employment patterns signalled a move-away from permanent forms of employment, to informal, short-term, temporary and less-than-secure types of work (Kässi and Lehdonvirta, 2016). Insecure and short-term employment accounts for 75% of jobs globally, and 50% of new work in the OECD since 1990s are of this type. In the UK, 25% of all employees are on zero-hour contracts (International Labour Organization, 2016), with a 28% growth in gig-

economy work since 2010, accounting for a 72% increase in London alone (New Economic Foundation, 2016). This has led commentators to discuss the emergence of a 'gig-economy', which enables employers to shrink and expand the size of their workforce at a rapid rate, transferring risk onto workers and resulting in a state of 'hyper precarity' for incumbent workers (Harvey et al., 2017; Visser, 2016).

The above arguments can be mapped across overarching narratives of neoliberal deregulation, individualisation and employment insecurity. Life trajectories may no longer be determined by social class (Andersen, 2009), yet the negative impact of labour market changes on workers cannot be overlooked (Garvey and Stewart, 2015; Hardgrove et al., 2015; Heery and Salmon, 2000). More qualified perspectives (Prosser, 2016), however, trace the disproportionate impact of deregulation specifically on marginalised groups of workers who have limited social and legal rights (Moore et al., 2016; Standing, 2016). Marginalisation, in this instance, is caused by an intersection of social inequalities which may range from gender, ethnicity, employment or ex-offender status, and which turn workers into 'economic' outsiders (Emmenegger, 2012; Hatton, 2015; Vosko, 2010). Predominantly limited to zero-hour, temporary, low-pay, and undeclared work, 'economic' outsiders are likely to face a range of negative experiences in line with the precarity of their employment contexts (Greer, 2016; Prosser, 2016; Standing, 2011; Vosko, 2010). This can be connected with Standing's (2011) warnings of precariat anxiety, alienation and anomie, and echoes Sennett's (1998) argument for the corrosive impact which loss of career paths and precarious flexibilisation is likely to have on the worker's Self. The uncertainty of Brexit, following the June 2016 referendum in the UK, is likely to punctuatethe same trajectory and further detriment the precariat's already weakened access to work-based provisions such as paid and family-friendly leave, health and safety protection, right to time off work and so on (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2017).

Considering the opposite end of the spectrum, Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft (2013) argue that similar insecurity and uncertainty is also encountered by high-skilled and well-educated software developers involved in 'knowledge work' (Castells, 2009). In this field, it is the rise and spread of 'crowdsourcing' which avoids contractual costs and

allows software development companies to pass risks onto the crowd of workers. This is recognised by Standing (2011) who reminds us that the threat of precarity is a socio-economic risk shared by all, regardless of their current economic status (Vosko, 2010; Andrijasevic and Saccheto, 2016; Standing, 2014).

Placing Sensemaking in a Poststructuralist Framework

However, a number of precarity studies across a range of national contexts such as the UK (Doogan, 2009); the US (Kalleberg, 2013) and Canada (Vosko, 2010) suggest that the circumstances, experiences and behaviours of workers in precarious work are too complex to be studied through the theoretical prism of antagonistic, capital-labour dualism. Researchers are aware that moving the discussion beyond the sphere of work can lead towards a much wider conceptualisation of precarity, for instance, as an existential insecurity of the human condition (Butler, 2004; Lewis et al., 2015), yet this does not necessarily justify an exclusive focus on the contexts of work, or the selective discussion of negative precarious experiences, only. Certainly, precarious work is likely to lead to alienation and anomie (Standing, 2011). It is likely to be feminised on account of the historic 'gender contract' between the unpaid, female family work and paid, male breadwinning (Standing, 2011; Vosko, 2010:6). Migrant workers are also likely to be over-represented in precarious work and encounter exploitation due to their reduced social protection and 'denizen' status (Standing, 2014; 2011). Nevertheless, and despite such negative framing, a growing number of studies (Paret, 2016; Wright, 2016) acknowledge the coexistence of positive and negative experiences, that is, the possibility of precarious work being chosen and performed to suit and support individual needs.

Such an argument appears well-aligned with Giddens 'project of the Self' narrative (Webb, 2004). Accepting that the advent of modernity poses a threat to workers' identities, Giddens (1991) nevertheless disagrees that it has had a 'corrosive' impact on his/her Self, as suggested by Sennett (1998), but has instead 'remade' it (Webb, 2004). The objective reality of work has become more uncertain and flexible (Giddens, 1991) but

this has also created opportunities for participation and, conceivably, a wider range of working experiences. A number of publications support this view. Burawoy (2012) has discussed the scope for workers to retain control through the 'making out' games he observed during his 10 months in a South Chicago factory. In this line of argument, the objective reality of precarity very much exists, yet enables individual strategies which a worker, the embodiment of *homo ludens* (workers-as-players) can deploy for his or her own benefit and resist the colonisation of his/her Self by management's control mechanisms (Alvesson et al., 2008; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; O'Doherty and Willmott, 2009; 2001; 2000). In turn, and focusing on the experiences and behaviours of precarious migrants, Alberti (2014) points to the existence of 'mobility power', or, the ability to utilise one's temporary status and weak attachment to work in order to resist, or exit 'bad' jobs and escape degrading terms and conditions. In addition, migrants can also use temporary employment to gain new skills, expand their network and utilise their weak attachment to a particular job. Although such examples qualify the 'positive' experiences of precarious workers as 'satisficing', that is, a tenuous and instrumental relationship with work, and viewing it as a means-to-an-end (Alberti, 2014; Katungi et al, 2006), they highlight the scope for a range of precarious behaviours and attitudes against an exploitative, postmodern labour process.

This argument can be connected with the 'poststructuralist' turn in labour process theory, which points to the significance not only of the questions which Braverman's (1998) *Labour and Monopoly Capital* asks, but also those it does not (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001). Specifically, this is the question of the 'missing subject' (Burawoy, 1979) and his/her role in shaping the capitalist production process by opening spaces for enjoyment (Sosteric, 1996), cynicism (Fleming and Spicer, 2003) and dispersed everyday resistance (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001; Scott, 1985). In turn, this requires the acknowledgement of such mundane, 'informal and inconspicuous' forms of resistance (Thomas and Davies, 2005:686) as 'weapons' which are part of the arsenal of the working 'weak' (Scott, 1985). This includes both overt *behaviours* but also covert, non-antagonistic and clandestine-resistance *processes* such as 'critical reflection' and interpretation which occurs at the 'level of meaning and identities' (Thomas and Davies,

2005:2005:687). In this sense resistance can be viewed not simply as a Newtonian opposition of labour-capital forces (Knight and McCabe, 2000) but as a symbolic opposition to the very 'management rhetoric' (Spicer and Böhm, 2007:1668).

Such an argument is not universally accepted, and the full range of covert resistance behaviours, including: 'organizational humour, parody, skepticism, and piss taking (sic)' (Contu, 2008:368) are, at times, disparaged. Specifically, they are regarded as 'feel-good' forms of behaviour which may offer a degree of worker gratification but are a far cry from the 'Real Act' of resistance which is transformative, shocking and performed at a great personal cost or risk to the worker. When mundane and everyday practices *are* recognised as resistance, they are deemed 'decaf' resistance, that is, one that is harmless and unobtrusive (Contu, 2008:370). Such 'decaf' resistance is, at its best, placid and non-threatening while, at its worst, it supports existing organisational aims and targets since 'cynical' workers are likely to perform even more efficiently than other employees (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). Does this line of reasoning suggest that resistance is worthy not in itself, in terms of personal 'use value', but only *qua* its 'exchange value', that is, the level of personal damage which a worker 'pays'? In his seminal, *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), based on his two-year observation of Malaysian villager resistance against those seeking to extract labour, taxes and rents from them (Scott, 1985:xvi), political anthropologist James C. Scott disagrees. For him resistance, even that which ultimately fails to achieve its purpose, is valuable and may grant workers a short respite from their subjugation to the relations of production, even creating shared memory for future workers (Scott, 1985:28-29). This can be the case even when the most mundane and everyday forms of resistance are used and does not require 'heroic' (Scott, 1985:34-40) and headline-grabbing acts of defiance.

Therefore, there is a need and rationale to further investigate space of resistance in a precarious work context, rather than dismiss low-skill, low-pay, low-security workers as destined for subjugation, which is only occasionally interspersed with fleeting moments of resistance, yet brief and insignificant. However, to do this, it is necessary to adopt a theoretical lens which both fits the poststructuralist framework outlined above, and is able

to account for the diverse range of precarious experiences. The latter appear to oscillate between the positive precariousness of those entering precarious work through choice, and the negative precariousness of those in insecure employment against their will. The uncertain and flexible context of modern, which both Sennett (1998) and Giddens (1991) accept, is such that the two states are themselves fluid and interconnected. As Vosko (2010) has already acknowledged, the categories of precarious and secure work could overlap, even lead to relative security for precarious workers, as well as relative insecurity for non-precarious workers. Furthermore, it is not my intention to diminish the impact of precarious structures on worker experiences, nor undermine the social and employment rights agenda of protest movements such as Occupy, MayDay and Euro MayDay (Standing, 2011). Rather, I seek to investigate the ongoing capacity for workers to make sense of their precarious employment contexts and open spaces of (everyday, mundane, covert) resistance in the process.

Sennett (1998) has already discussed the practice of storytelling (Sennett, 1998), which helps workers to retrospectively organise their personal histories and, thus, go beyond an objective assessment of their employment terms and conditions (Hardgrove at al., 2015; Worth, 2016). In this study, I am also interested in the scope for workers to use storytelling in order to make sense and interpret their fluid and fragmented career paths and trajectories to date. This may not be the high-risk, high-personal-cost collective struggle against the structures of capital, yet deserves attention as 'identity work' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) against the colonisation of the 'Self' by management techniques and organisational rhetoric (Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Spicer and Böhm, 2007). Thus, I adopt sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995), in order to reference the process of knowledge construction through which individuals engage and interpret events and contexts which are new, ambiguous or unexpected (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Hernes and Maitlis, 2010; Weick et al., 2005) as a useful approach, congruent with the wider, postructuralism framework.

Sensemaking has significant utility as it enables us to transcend the labour-capital duality and account for both context and experience, accommodating the process of

interpretation and range of meanings which workers can assign to the same event or context. Importantly, sensemaking is an active process of knowledge creation which occurs retrospectively whereby individuals consider their present contexts by comparing what is being encountered with what they had anticipated. It is an on-going and reflexive process of knowledge construction, which is achieved retrospectively by reviewing the situation in question, and reconciling the reality anticipated or believed, with the reality encountered (Weick, 1995:15; Weick et al., 2005). Thus, and viewed through a sensemaking lens, experiences of precariousness combine and blend cues from the worker's current employment but reconstructed in the light of his/her personal life-history up to the present (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). This makes sensemaking theory a particularly suitable for the study of precarious work since, as a process, sensemaking is triggered when individuals encountered the very uncertainty, ambiguity, 'shocks' and 'breaks in routine' (Helms-Mills et al., 2010) offered by precarious contexts. Furthermore, as narratives created through sensemaking are contingent upon an individual's relationship with others in the same context, the application of a sensemaking lens (Weick, 1995) is capable of offering insights into the shared interpretation of certain (precarious) contexts and thus highlight the scope for precarious worker resistance or compliance in a given context. Therefore, the purpose of sensemaking is to show how individual navigate their contexts and create narratives in order to situate and find their own place, while producing collective meaning (Weick, 1995). This is significant since, while engaging in sensemaking does not release precarious workers from the shackles of production relations, it can enable the latter's subjugative and colonising attack on workers' sense of 'Self' to be managed. Such everyday resistance is further made possible on account of the atomised and fluid environment of modernity (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2000) which appears to open spaces of paradox through a 'corrosive' (Sennett, 1998) and yet 'creative' (Giddens, 1991) impact on the Self, by alienating the worker (Braverman, 1998) and yet offering him/her amusement (Burawoy, 1979; Sosteric, 1996). Although such considerations do not abolish the exploitative reality of the precarious context, they suggest the need to go beyond it (O'Doherty and Willmott, 200; 2001). Sensemaking, thus, allow me to explore the process through which workers understand, construct and 'author' subjective knowledge about precarious contexts (Weick, 1995),

orient themselves within those contexts, and resist them. It is to this investigation that I now turn.

Method

In this article I present findings from 71 in-depth, qualitative interviews with precarious workers employed in low-skill, low-pay roles, likely to have limited trade union representation and lack of secure employment (Standing, 2011; Savage et al., 2013; Vosko, 2010) and split into three groups: migrants, carers and hospitality. Of the 71 workers, approximately 55% (40) were in the 18-35-year-old bracket, and all but 21% (15) were female, further reflecting Standing's (2011) claim that precarious work tends to be feminised and comprise of a higher proportion of younger people. In adopting a purposive sampling design (Teddlie and Yu, 2007) I specifically focused on workers likely to occupy the type of jobs conceptualised by Standing (2016), Vosko (2010) and Savage et al. (2013) as precarious.

Thus, migrants (9) were recruited by across the South West of England through social media groups. Of the nine participants who came forward, four had been in the UK for over five years and the other five – between one and three years. Their level of English proficiency was very low, that the interviews had to be carried in their native language by the interviewer, a native Bulgarian speaker, and then translated into English. Strikingly, of the migrant group, only two participants had contracts yet, through them, received only the minimum rate of pay. One of them, Gergana, worked in a care home and had a zero-hour contract, while Liliana was a zero-hour waitress. The other participants were either self-employed or, like Evgeny, were not formally registered and worked for cash.

The carer group (35) was selected on account of being identified by Savage et al. (2013) as representative of the precariat through their minimum-wage rate of pay and yet were also highly-qualified since the approached care facilities had clients with special needs which required personnel to have advanced care qualifications, and some were educated at a Master's level. This was somewhat paradoxical since, echoing

Braverman's (1998) argument, it suggested that despite the qualification requirements placed on carers, they were employed on zero-hour contracts and paid a minimum wage. The gender split in this particular group further reflected the highly feminised (Moore et al., 2018; Vosko, 2010) nature of care work (only two males were interviewed).

Lastly, the hospitality group consisted of cleaners (27) who worked in hotels and a large international company. The majority of participants in this group were either made redundant or lost their previous industry jobs through employer closure, as a result of which were now working as cleaners (janitors) due to lack of alternative employment and/or the inability to successfully compete for better paid work in the area. Members of this group were employed on zero-hour contracts and were paid at a minimum wage level, which they expected and viewed as typical for the geographic area and this type of work.

Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Sixty-six hours of interviews were conducted and analysed for narratives of precarious work. In an effort to gain a detailed and in-depth understanding of what precariousness meant for participants, I chose a phenomenological method of analysis (Kvale, 2013; Sokolowski, 2000), which enabled me to start with individual 'parts' of the precarious experience, as presented in worker narratives, and gradually construct the 'whole' meaning of the phenomenon. I opened each interview by looking to understand the participant's route into this type of work: was it choice, or lack of choice which lead them to their present role? What was work like and was their an aspect of the context, colleagues, managers, clients, that they felt particularly strongly about? What were their long-term plans?

I analysed data in line with the phenomenological, 'meaning condensation' method (Kvale, 1996), which starts with the researcher reading each script in detail in order to become familiar with all narratives. I then carried out initial, line-by-line coding to identifying all references to working experiences, practices, expectations and interpretations, identifying all phrases with stand-alone meaning. I did not deploy existing codes but allowed them to emerge from the narratives by starting with 'natural meaning units' in the data, gradually clustering them to form wider categories, and overarching

themes describing the three sensemaking narratives, which emerged against the context of the employment structures (Dowling, 2007; Holloway, 1997; Kvale, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Thus, my intention was to capture the anticipated richness of precarious experiences, including instances of both positive and negative meaning-creation, and taking into account any structural cues (level of pay, conditions of work, management behaviours, relationships with colleagues, and so on) (Weick, 1995), incorporated in workers' sensemaking.

Findings

In this section I present three stories which, although narrated by individual participants, were prominent across all sample groups and presented a collected interpretation of precariousness, sensemade in relation to previous experiences, expectations and relationships with others. They also showcased precarious workers' ability find fulfilment and self-worth even in insecure and precarious contexts using sensemaking as 'Self'-defence. In what follows, it is important to acknowledge that although retrospective experiences, relationships with others and fulfilment were distinct narratives through which workers interpreted and re-constructed their contexts, the three were not separate but overlapped into a 'whole' precarious experience (Sokolowski, 2000).

Retrospective Sensemaking: Precariousness as Opportunity

The first overarching theme of the study, expressed in line with the retrospective (Weick, 1995) aspect of sensemaking, was the tendency to interpreting the present reality of precarious work not as a fixed reality of exploitation (Braverman, 1979), but in the context of past experiences and life trajectories. Consequently, participants in our sample viewed their working contexts not by applying an objective set of criteria contingent on level of pay, leave, protection (Standing, 2011) and not by acknowledging the sophisticated range of management instruments and techniques, which made for well-organised exploitation (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001). Rather, precarious workers tended to reflect on their full history of past employment. This was illustrated by Alexey

(56, a take-away delivery driver) who, having described the difficulties stemming from his lower-than-minimum wage and having acknowledged that pay in his native country was better than what he was earning in the UK, declared himself 'happy':

> *"I could earn more in six months doing seasonal work in [home country] than I earned over the past year over here but it's not just about the money. It is the whole experience. Back home, I could be stopped by police on my way to work, or after work and they will find an excuse to fine me or ask for a bribe. I used to do a lot of driving so this was a constant worry. Here it is different, things are much more transparent and I know what to expect."*

This did not mean that Alexey was oblivious to the precarious nature of his present circumstances. Indeed, Alexey offered several examples of struggling. Those ranged from language difficulties in arranging a doctor's appointment to Alexey's limited ability to communicate with customers, and having to 'tighten the belt' as he adjusted to his low income. This, however, was not anything he had not experienced before and was quite prepared to put up with it because life in the UK made him feel 'safe' and 'happy'.

Stanko (28, a self-employed taxi driver) also sensemade his time and range of jobs in the UK in relation to the existential uncertainty he experienced in his native country, which made his current experience of exploitation less profound. Stanko's enthusiastic recounting of working experiences and apparent sampling of multiple career paths echoed Giddens' (1991) 'project of the self' conceptualisation of available options in flexible, postmodern contexts. His story appeared 'playful' (Burawoy, 1979), not weighed by exploitation but buoyant with the enjoyment of adventure:

> *"So, we flew to the UK and got a train, got to the meat factory and there were about 20 of us there at the time. Well, all the nicer positions were already taken, and what was left for us was to be cleaners so we had to wash intestines, guts, you name it, off the floor. Still, I didn't mind it, because I didn't want to go back home - there was nothing for me there. Nothing at all. Since then, I have moved all over the place, worked in so many places, a chewing-gum factory, a battery factory, a supermarket, the Post Office...I am now a taxi driver (laughs)! I work for a taxi company but they show us as self-employed. I don't mind. Life was pretty tough at home but in the UK everything is nice, I enjoy it."*

For Stanko there was no contradiction between the precarity of his working conditions of work, and his positive personal experience. He felt that migrants were expected to work their way up the employment ladder so, for him, any work was acceptable and Stanko believed that real success was not the job itself but pushing himself to be the best he can be (Burawoy, 1979) and he was having fun with it (Sosteric, 1996). Stanko did not regret or begrudge the need to have multiple temporary contracts since this was congruent with the precariousness as opportunity narrative through which he sensemade migrant life in general, and his own life trajectory in particular. Stanko was not constrained by the labour market but rather, presented himself as exploiting it to his own ends.

The relational sense-making of the precarious experience as opportunity, and resistance to 'Self'-colonisation, was narrated by participants in other groups, as well. It appeared to be especially prominent in the context of care work, where participants had either encountered previous bad practices, bad management, or both. Once again, it was the context of past experiences, rather than an objective assessment of the present reality which presented participants as resisting their current employer by viewing current working experiences as opportunity. Care assistant Leanne (26) explained that, although she had to work long hours and was paid a minimum wage, her current position was not as challenging as working on a dementia unit, which is where Leanne was previously employed:

> *"The dementia unit, where I was before, was so unpredictable. I received a bit of a battering out of the blue one day. I was on my break, and I had a bowl of chips [fries], and I gave him [a resident at the unit] one, and then I went to have one myself, and he was like, 'who said you can have that', and smack! [he punched me]. I fell, he punched me again and again. I was taken to hospital and they told me I had a fractured coccyx and cheek bone. The nurse there summed it up, she said: 'You don't get paid enough for this!'"*

The previous working experience did not have to features such extremes of physical abuse, in order to serve as a benchmark against which present experiences were reconstructed and sensemade positively. For trainee nursery assistant Beckie (31), the

present job offered a more fulfilling experience than simply completing a 'load of paperwork', which is what she had to do in her previous, office-based role, itself a reminder that exploitation in relations of production does not occur on the factory-floor alone (Braverman, 1979). Trainee nursery assistant Joanna (18) enjoyed work despite the low level of pay, because it gave her the opportunity to work with children and, thus, was more than 'sweeping the floor and making cups of tea', which is what she did while working at a hair salon. Care assistant John (41) expressed a similar sentiment in insisting that he was making a positive contribution in his current role, as well as having fun (Sosteric, 1996). John sensemade his current position and sense of 'Self' in relation to poor experiences in the past, which caused him to rejecting disparaging categorisation of his job:

> *"[There are some] care homes that put them [residents] in front of the telly all day long and leave them as that but, this doesn't happen here. We don't just wipe bums. We are here to make people's lives better! Since I have been here, we have taken the guys [residents] out on day trips and some days it doesn't even feel like you are working (…)!"*

Yet, the relational sense-making of precarious work did guarantee a positive interpretation, and there were narratives where engaging in retrospective sensemaking led to a sense of missed opportunity. This was akin to Braverman's (1998) description of worker alienation as a permanent and permeating feature of postmodern capitalist contexts, pre-determined by exploitative relations of production (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001; 2000). In this context, I encountered shop assistant Liliana's (24) narrative. Liliana lamented the disappointment, which her move to the UK had been, especially given that she had graduated with a Business degree and felt entitled to a better working opportunity. Liliana had previously worked as an administrator in an office, a post from which she was made redundant some 18 months prior to the interview and being forced to accept work as a shop assistant led to her sense of missed opportunity and apparent alienation:

> *"Getting a degree in a different language is not easy at all (…). I'd never studied in the UK before so it was something very different, totally unknown to me. I thought*

that at the end of it, I'd get a job where I work with normal people! Doing this [working as a shop assistant] is definitely not what I expected when I came to Britain. It's so horrible!"

Importantly, this co-existence of positive and negative precariousness interpretations within a broadly similar precarity context of low rate of pay, temporary, or zero-hour working conditions indicated the salience of subjective sensemaking strategies (Burawoy, 1979) of precarious workers. This was the tendency for some workers to reject, resist and, indeed, 'Self'-defend against the face-value acceptance of working realities. This was achieved by constructing their experiences relationally, by drawing on their own life histories and beliefs (Weick, 1995), and by reflecting on past experiences and contexts. For a number of our participants those previous experiences were distinctively negative and this led to a more positive assessment of present experiences. This did not, however, mean that precarious workers had no option but to try and make themselves feel better by reminiscing on how much worse they had had it in the past. Although not formally collectivised through a Trade Union, there was still scope to form meaningful relationships with others and collectively recreate meanings different from the objective reality of precarious contexts (Helms-Mills et al., 2010; Weick, 1995). I now consider this in greater detail.

Collective Sensemaking: Precariousness as Camaraderie

The importance of work-based relationships, the second overarching theme of the study, was narrated by Spanish migrant Celeste (26) in the context of oppressive demands made by the owner of the restaurant where she worked as a zero-hour waitress. Celeste and fellow-workers appeared to work in a modern Panopticon, and were under constant video surveillance by the owner, who was able to monitor the kitchen and restaurant even when he was at home. Celeste could not effect a change in the terms and conditions of her zero-hour, minimum-wage employment, itself a paradigm of multi-level exploitation through management techniques and contractual provision (Armano et al., 2017). Nevertheless, she pushed-back against the condescending and derogatory treatment of the owner and his attempts to diminish her Self-worth, by responding in kind.

"I think that he was trying to make all of us feel that he was the boss and he was above all of us. He would also make me feel self-conscious for not being able to speak English very well. For example, he would use words I don't understand in front of customers, like asking me to go and get a 'saucer' one time, then explaining in great detail what that was and what it was used for, after I said I didn't know what a saucer was. So, we started to call him 'amo', which is a rude, Spanish slang word which means slave-driver. I do it to his face, too and he has no clue!"

In the interviews with hospitality employees, participants narrated further instances of subversive activity, through which they reconstructed (Webb, 2004) the precarity imposed on them. Certainly, the insecure context was present and exerted a pull towards the void of alienation and insecurity (Braverman, 1979; Standing, 2011) yet participants were able to use relationships with others to create collective meanings (Thomas and Davies, 2005; Weick, 1995) away from the objective reality of work. This could take the shape of invisible to the employer resistance through cynicism (Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Spicer and Böhm, 2007) where workers seemingly attended to their responsibilities, while in reality adjusting their practices in contravention of management directives. John (40), male cleaner on a zero-hour contract noted:

"They [managers] are not interested in your opinion, they talk at you, not to you and you are supposed to swallow it, which I refuse to do. They come up with all these directives and procedures and it is like the Loch Ness monster, there is no substance, only talk. I navigate myself around these things [staff meetings] and only spend time with those colleagues and clients who respect what I do. I do my own thing most of the time, so it makes my day easier."

John's employer often introduced new policies with minimum staff consultation and little prior warning. These were disliked by employees who had to adjust to new machinery, or use new cleaning materials which were either not as effective, or more corrosive and, thus, posed a danger to workers. Those policies were introduced indiscriminately and it was possible for staff to utilise gaps and inconsistencies to their own advantage, in order to sabotage rules and regulations (Burawoy, 1979; Scott, 1985). Simone (38), female cleaner, provided an example of resistance through 'games' (Burawoy, 2012) and 'feigned ignorance' (Scott, 1985) practiced by cleaners:

"I am not supposed to wear jewelry, but I have both my wedding ring and my engagement ring on at work. I understand that it may cause a problem, if a [ring] stone fell, but I wear it and an extra set of earrings sometimes! I just hide them whenever there is a senior manager around, or pretend I haven't been told [about the policy]!"

Furthermore, and while not admitting to insubordination or open conflict with their managers, workers could be selective with regards to whose manager's request for help they would heed and whose they would not. Participants also appeared to retain sufficient autonomy over their daily routines to act on their manager preferences. Jane (40), a female caterer, spoke of members of her team even choosing to side-step their manager in order to achieve a more beneficial outcome. Participants would also use divide-and-conquer 'strategies' (Burawoy, 1979) and play managers against each other. As an example, precarious workers would target more 'lenient' managers in order to have leave requests agreed in busy periods, when policy prohibited the granting of leave. Jane also explained that her team would: '*do things for certain supervisors because they will be flexible to you*', engaging in a tit-for-tat type of exchange, which seemed to place precarious workers and their managers on a level playing field, highlighting their informal power and scope for resistance despite the formal authority and power of managers (Braverman, 1998; Scott, 1985).

Such collective sensemaking of precariousness appeared to be influenced and made possible (Weick, 1995) by the presence of both colleagues and clients, and a number of participants in our hospitality sample spoke of rejecting their association with employers and managers in order to align themselves with their client group. This was especially salient in instances where cleaning personnel were working alongside clients, and when clients both accepted, and treated cleaners as equals. This was recognised and valued by participants, with a male caterer sharing in private that, outside of work, he introduced himself as working for the client and not his actual employer. Such a statement was not necessarily prompted by considerations of higher status or willingness to improve social standing. Our participants spoke of being proud to be cleaners and caterers, which suggested that the issue was neither to do with job satisfaction, nor public image. Rather, it appeared steeped and an effort to 'make out' (Burawoy, 1979), retain control over

working trajectories and resist the objective reality of contexts, which informed the construction, and sensemaking of their employment identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Weick, 1995). Victoria (34), female cleaner, even spoke of having to 'endure' working for her employer because she was uncomfortable with her managers and supervisors. However, rather than simply complying, she had taken the path of other participants in the sample and opted for minimised contact with her direct employers and associated solely with the clients. In this way she could:

> *"(...) forget about my employer or even pretend that they do not exist until they start pulling me out for pointless meetings and training to do with legal requirement, (…) ticking boxes for someone else's benefit. I tend to do my own thing and we [colleagues] tend to muck-in and help each other, as and when we need to, without asking management for permission"*

Such covert tactics of resistance could also take on an overt, 'fully-caffeinated' (compare with Contu, 2008) nature, where workers used their mobility power (Alberti, 2014) to reject their current position in the relations of production, and exit them. This was the experience of nursery assistant Harriet (24) who had been bullied in her previous work. Harried had always known she wanted to work with children and at the time of the interview was already fully qualified and had experience of working in 'loads of nurseries'. Harriet had only just moved into her present role, having changed jobs due to an abusive senior manager who would verbally denigrate and disparage her in front of colleagues and clients. Harriet had struggled to leave on account of her friendship with fellow colleagues, yet when leaving became the only option, she was able to take advantage of it:

> *"Leaving was very hard and I really struggled…I just wanted to stick it out as long as I could 'cause I loved my job and I loved working with [my colleagues]. Yet, in the end, enough was enough and I just went. I left the manager to her own devices, let her find someone else. I am so much happier now."*

Thus, narratives discussed in this section suggested that the absence of collective organisation and Trade Union representation for workers in my sample did not preclude soft, mundane and everyday resistance (Scott, 1985) to precarious working structures.

Precarious workers could both collectively sensemake their working trajectory, and adjust power imbalances at work through choosing to help some supervisors and not others, work directly with clients or, in some instances, being able to side-step managers altogether. When necessary, they could also leave since precarious work appeared to exert a weaker pull than its secure, well-remunerated equivalent. Precarious workers were also able to see past their current conditions and adopt a longer-term strategy (Alberti, 2014; Burawoy, 2012), thus considering their precarious employment as a means-to-an-end, providing them with the skills and experience necessary to move closer toward their personal objectives, placed beyond the confines of a given organisational context. Interestingly, the context of low-pay and insecure work did not preclude workers from feeling grateful and valuing their contexts, and it is to those narratives I now turn.

Appreciative Sensemaking: Precariousness as Gratitude

Being grateful on account of having access to work, albeit uncertain and low-paid precarious work, was the third, overarching narrative in the study. Although precarious, these roles offered access to employment and meaningful remuneration. This was not just any employment, but often physically-demanding and taxing work and participants in my sample felt that this greater demand on their bodies distinguished them from others, for example those in secure, better-paid, 'office work'. Precarious work was an opportunity to prove themselves and demonstrate their worth, indeed, their 'grit' (Burawoy, 1979). Although precarious work is clearly fraught with issues, participants in my sample sensemade their positions as more significant than, simply a source of income. This seemed the most emphatically-expressed sentiment of 'Self'-defence in my sample, since it included a rejection of wider social perceptions (care work as 'dirty'). Instead, participants constructed their roles as having both symbolic, social value and worth beyond the overarching relations of production. Thus, work allowed care worker Joanna (32) to develop a sense of Self-esteem, and provided her with recognisable social category, on which she could draw upon and adopt. This was significant not only for Joanna as a person, but also as a role model to her daughter.

"Whilst I was off [work] and taking my girl for a walk one day, we saw a lady in a suit getting in her car. My girl asked what the lady was doing, and I told her she [the lady] was going to work. My little girl was so surprised to learn that mums go out to work, too. I explained to her that they did, and from that point onwards I resolved to be one of those mums who went to work. Going into care work has let me do that, and it is more than a job it is a vocation"

This was also the case with care assistant Leanne (26) who, despite her precarious employment and work-related injuries, enjoyed her job. Work enabled Leanne to move away from her past, and restructure her present as a success, not least because it enabled her to role-model positive behaviours and give 'the right' example to her daughter. This is why, for Leanne, the value of work stretched beyond the transactional aspect of an income, which paid the bills. It was an opportunity to recover and rebuild her identity and Self-worth in line with Giddens' (1991) 'project of the Self'.

"My Dad was an alcoholic so when my Mum was at work and I was off school, Dad would always take me down to the pub [bar] so I spent a lot of time there. I would then pick him up from the pub and walk him home, sometimes carrying him as he stumbled here and there. I wanted to protect my daughter from this. I wanted her to have the life I didn't and set the right example for her."

Care assistant Josh (28) felt the same way since work enabled him to not only provide for his son, but also be a good example and be a contributing member of society. Josh also enjoyed his job which, for him, did not feel like work at all and he sensemade his precariousness as gratitude for what he had, a job which allowed him to 'play' (Burawoy, 1979). Josh was not unaware of the context of work, his zero-hour contract and minimum pay. He was also cognizant of derogatory comments made by some of his acquaintances about the role of a carer as a 'bum-wiper'. Nevertheless, in his narrative, Josh passionately rejected such categorisation as derogatory and untrue. Interestingly, Josh was not taking personal offence but, rather, seemed incensed on behalf of his colleagues, and the industry as a whole. His appreciative sensemaking was focused on the fulfilment and satisfaction this type of work provided:

"When I meet new people, I never tell them what I do, cos you see it in their face, 'oh, you are a 'bum-cleaner'! It really makes me angry as these people don't

understand what a difference we make. They don't see the appreciation of our clients and their families. I think it's amazing, the support and the job satisfaction I get out of it, and being able to go home knowing that I have made someone else's day better, makes me feel better about myself! Knowing that without my support they might not have got the day they wanted to have."

A similar narrative occurred in migrant cleaner Maria's (37) narrative and she also spoke of wishing to teach her son the inherent value of 'work' which, although not always well-remunerated, enabled a person to make a contribution to society. Maria had been brought-up to 'go out and get a job' from an early age, and although for her this job was an opportunity for a better life, it was the sense of gratitude for being able to 'pay her dues' and do her duty to society, which dominated Maria's narrative.

"I have to work to earn money, it's like receiving water and sun to survive. I have always been taught that work is a necessity to survive, and a duty. Of course, in the UK things are different, there are benefits and people pushing their 6 kids around, while just smoking, drinking and drawing their benefits for nothing. The other day my son asked me where the money in the bank comes from, and I said, I go to work, you don't get money if you don't work. I took him in to clean with me and he was helping and he said to me, 'how much do you earn for this', and I said, 'guess', he said, '£100 a day', and I said, 'not that much, try again', and he said, '£60', I said, 'less' and he said, 'oh, so little?'. I said, 'what I do is worth doing for little money'.

Care assistant Donna (24) also spoke of a conversation, which she had recently had with her boyfriend. He had had asked Donna to 'pull a sickie' [take time off from work unofficially], so she could enjoy a day off-work with him. Donna had to explain that hers was not 'the kind of job where you can do that', the way a 'person in an office' could whenever they 'got the sniffles'. Trainee nursery assistant Beckie (31) also felt that her job 'mattered' and enabled her to achieve the type of satisfaction, she could not get in an 'office'. Nursery Assistant Cath (22) stated that hers was 'more than a job', which although 'stressful sometimes', enabled her to enjoy herself and have 'fun'. These narratives once again underscored not only resistance to external conceptualisations of precarious work as meaningless and exploitative, but also its entertaining, 'game-like' quality (Burawoy, 1979). This was expressed in despite workers' low-pay, short-term and often challenging conditions, and sought to highlight participants' personal work ethic. It

also served to provide a contrasting conceptualisation of them as the real heroes of society on account of being prepared to 'work hard' unlike 'others' who chose 'easier jobs' or did not work at all, instead relying benefits to get by. Thus, migrant Gergana (54, care assistant) stated that she had been taught the value of work in her native country and knew of no other way to live, while cleaners, such as Sharon (50), spoke of feeling compelled to follow the example set by their parents:

> *"But it's self-respect, you have been brought-up that way. Your parents always worked, your mother used to go out and do a cleaning job just for a little bit [of cash]"*

This resistance to Self-colonisation (Thomas and Davies, 2005) through appreciative sensemaking in worker narratives was not always constructed individually, but could become collective sensemaking where meanings were produced and reproduced through others (Weick, 1995). Thus, hospitality employees were able to sensemake their often negative contexts of low pay and poor management by discussing the enjoyment they gained through being part of a team of like-minded individuals, who often shared the same social history. In turn, while unhappy with managers, cleaners appreciated their colleagues as a 'family', whom they could trust and with whom they often chose to socialise outside of work. This 'precariousness as gratitude' theme emerged across other groups in my precarious work sample, and underscored the scope for workers to resist Self-subjugation through meaningful, work-based relationships. Nursery assistant Sophie (55) expressed this powerfully, when she suggested she made no distinction between relationships in her private and professional life:

> *"We spend time with each other and know each other well. With time, we have come to trust and rely on each other, we even help each other outside of work, we are that close. So, when there are staff problems, it's like part of your own family is suffering"*

Similar sentiments were expressed by waitress Celeste (26) who also referred to her colleagues as 'family', as did zero-hour waitress Zara (20) and zero-hour waiter Dale

(22), while zero-hour waiter Zac (22) spoke of his colleagues as 'our little dysfunctional family' who stayed together and had fun 'day in and day out' (Burawoy, 1979).

Consequently, in this third and final sensemaking theme, precariousness was narrated as appreciation and gratitude for work participation, itself a 'fun' and game-like activity (Burawoy, 1979; Sosteric, 1996) built on social contribution, personal growth and relationship with colleagues. This served as another reminder that precarious experiences were necessarily complex, steeped in subjectivity, and often transcending the objective reality and expected antagonism between labour and capital (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2000; 2001). This accounted for the paradoxical co-existence of alienation and fulfilment in participant narratives, and provided precarious workers in my study the opportunity to open covert and overt resistance spaces within the structural framework of production relations.

Discussion

In this article I consider scope for worker resistance in precarity contexts, building on earlier arguments for on-going alienation of workers in modern capitalist contexts underscored by formal employer control (Braverman, 1998; Sennett, 1998; Standing, 2011; Vosko, 2010) and counter-perspectives extolling scope for mundane, everyday workers resistance strategies (Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Spicer and Böhm, 2007; Thomas and Davies, 2005) in an on-going 'project of the Self' (Burawoy, 1979; 2012; Giddens, 2001). Accordingly, my in-depth interviews of 71 precarious workers suggested that working contexts mattered, and worker experiences were influenced by the low-pay and low-tenure reality of their employment conditions. However, and although significant, precarious contexts were not the sole determinant of worker precariousness and workers were able to interpret and reconstruct both their working contexts and working trajectories through an ongoing process of subjective sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Workers were also able to use sensemaking narratives as a form of 'Self'-defence in order to resist management techniques aimed at identity-colonisation and the production of 'appropriate individuals' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; O'Doherty and Willmott, 2000).

Accordingly, three of the predominant narratives in worker interviews used retrospective, collective and appreciative cues (Weick, 1995) in order to interpret precarious contexts, constructing a sense of meaning and attaining fulfilment against the relations of production. This subjective interpretation did not change the actual working contexts within which work was carried out, and could not be equated with 'heroic' and headline-grabbing (Scott, 1985) collectivised protest movements like Occupy, MayDay and Euro MayDay. However, it did demonstrate precarious workers' capacity for symbolic, everyday resistance through minor subversive practices, rather than passive acceptance and compliance with top-down authority, control and subjugation.

Thus, in line with the first sensemaking narrative, reinterpretation of the present in the context of individual life and working histories did not mask the stark reality which some of our migrant participants encountered, nor made them oblivious to it. However, it provided a much more individualised and subjective benchmark, against which individual precariousness was constructed, managed and even 'played' out (Burawoy, 2012). Certainly, using retrospective cues did not guarantee a positive framing of individual precariousness and there were instances where precariousness led to a sense of missed opportunity and disappointment as per Braverman's (1998) alienation argument. Yet, both narratives of positive and negative precariousness pointed to the continued scope for worker goal-setting and strategy-deployment (Alberti, 2014; Burawoy, 1979) in order to manage personal trajectories. Thus, workers' sense of fulfillment and disappointed was contingent on their present realities, yet this was not simply a transactional assessment of objective cues (pay, job security) but was predicated upon a more encompassing and subjective evaluation that showcased their scope to interpret, sabotage, mock, barter, resist and enjoy the relations of production.

The management and individual shaping of the precarious experience was also possible through collective meaning creation, the second sensemaking narrative, which further highlighted precarious workers' potential for everyday resistance. I was unable to observe the praxis of formalised or large-scale resistance in the present study since there

were no Trade Unions representing workers in the organisations I visited. Nevertheless, participants discussed instances of informal resistance against policy, procedures and management request which, although not changing the objective terms and conditions of work, could help them negotiate aspects of the working relationship and resist the 'hegemony of management' (Burawoy, 2012; Spicer and Böhm, 2000). In this way workers could choose where, when, and towards whom of their managers to direct their discretionary effort. I came across instances of workers being able to side-step, or even exclude supervisors from their daily operations and, thus, organise work tasks by negotiating directly with the client, or other colleagues. This offered some support for Hardgrove et al.'s (2015) proposition that precarious workers strategise in the present to achieve a desirable outcome for the future which, for workers in my sample, led to soft, informal and often invisible resistance (Scott, 1985) against the commodifying and alienating impact of precarious structures.

Related to this argument, the third overarching theme, that of appreciative sensemaking, suggested that precarious contexts were not enough to subjugate the worker's Self and diminish the dignity of work even in less-than-secure conditions (Antunes, 2013; Katungi et al., 2016). Indeed, participants took pride in their ability to withstand the hardship of precarious work, which gave them a sense of personal achievement and fulfilment for being 'tougher' than others, for instance, those in 'white-collar' work or the unemployed. There was little evidence that this translated into the development of a 'rising class' (Standing, 2011), yet enabled workers to reject a purely instrumental, money-to-pay bills take on their employment and, instead, view it as part of ongoing Self-development (Giddens, 2001).

Precarious work was further valued by workers in my sample on account of the social contact it provided (Brown et al., 2012; Hebson et al., 2015). Thus, respondents across the sample drew strength from the familial-level of support offered by work groups, the consequence of meaningful participation and shared identity which had become more salient than the workers' individual identities (Haslam and Platow, 2001; Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Importantly, identity coalesced around the precariousness as an experience

and in some respects this was strengthened by poor terms and conditions and chronic insecurity.   This could make precarious work not only bearable, but even game-like and 'fun', as nursery assistant Cath (22) put it, since workers enjoyed the sense of collective endeavour and were grateful for the strong bonds of camaraderie that developed as a way of 'Self'-defence against precarious contexts and management control.

Conclusion

Consequently, placing Weick's (1995) sensemaking approach in a poststructuralist framework (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2000; 2001), the present study offers several insights into the narratives through which workers interpret, reframe and even create spaces of resistance within contexts of precarious work.

First, in this study, I take up a clear position in the ongoing debate on the nature and experiences, associated with precarious work. To date, the precarious work literature has underscored the complex array of 'layered' insecurities (Lewis et al., 2015a; 2015b) for workers, as well as the latter's subjugation, commodification and alienation (Braverman, 1976; Greer, 2016; Kalleberg, 2013; Standing, 2011) by their precarious contexts.   However, my findings suggest that *prima facie* acceptance of structural determinism (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2000), and overt focus on the range of negative experiences of workers is limiting. Moreover, such arguments underplay or dismiss (Contu, 2008) the scope for mundane, everyday and covert resistance (Scott, 1985), through covert (cynicism) and overt (sabotage) of organisational policy and management directives (Fleming and Spicer, 2005), even in precarious work. Therefore, by adopting a sensemaking lens (Weick, 1995), and grounding my study in a wider, poststructuralist framework (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001; 2000), I was able to study the main narratives through which precarious workers opened up spaces of just such covert and overt resistance at work, and engaged in 'Self'-defence against the subjugating impact of precarious relations of production on their body, and sense of Self (Sennett, 1994).

Second, I highlight the scope for positive experiences even in low-pay and insecure work, achieved through subjective sensemaking and through the three narratives discussed above. In doing so, I propose that participants' positive experiences should not be dismissed as harmless, 'decaf' resistance (Contu, 2008), or as 'satisficing' behaviour of workers who have accepted and resigned themselves to subjugating 'shackles' of precarious work. Disregarding such positive experiences and scope for resistance, in turn, risks once again 'losing the subject' (Burawoy, 1979) and viewing workers as passive recipients of low pay and poor conditions. Instead, instances of everyday resistance, fulfilment, dignity and camaraderie highlight workers' ability to forge meaningful experiences even within precarious contexts. This would hopefully encourage precarious work researchers to reconsider the labour-capital divide in their field, and adopt the type of postructuralist (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2000) paradigm used in my study.

Lastly, I suggest that the multiple insecurities (Standing, 2011) of precarious work are not standardising worker experiences, nor (presently) turning them into a single case study in alienation (Braverman, 1979). Workers in my sample were not excluded from work, did not lack a sense of Self, nor felt coerced into labour by external or self-regulating compulsion. Instead, work retained its significance as a source of identity, place of social contact, a sense of workplace 'family', and a cause for gratitude in being able to role-model traditional work-ethic values. This points to the potential of the precariat to deploy resistance strategies in an on-going search for a better life (Burawoy, 1979), yet it is as yet unclear if this will be as a vanguard for the new populism. The question remains open and future research could consider the experiences of second and third generation of unemployed workers at one end of the spectrum, and narratives of highly-skilled but employed on precarious terms and conditions workers, at the other.

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