Collection Introduction: The new normal of working lives

Stephanie Taylor and Susan Luckman

1School of Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

2EU Centre for Mobilities, Migrations and Cultural TransformationsUniversity of South AustraliaAdelaideSAAustralia

Abstract

Lauren Berlant (2011) has written of the need to understand the problem of living contemporary lives, including the 'new normal' and 'new ordinary' (p.261). This collection investigates the new normal of work and employment through international, interdisciplinary research into contemporary worker experience. The introductory chapter sets out the themes of the collection and introduces individual chapters. It argues that the most significant feature to emerge in the studies is the affective weighting attached to personalised and increasingly individualised work, and the shift this provides around how people want to work and organise their lives. Within different employment arrangements, this ambition promotes the intensification of labour and therefore becomes an 'obstacle to flourishing' (p.1) and an example of the 'cruel optimism' discussed by Berlant.

Introduction

Lauren Berlant (2011) has written of the need to understand the problem of living contemporary lives, including the 'new normal' and 'new ordinary' (p. 261). This critical international and interdisciplinary collection investigates the new normal of work and employment by examining the viewpoints and experience of the workers themselves, and the privilege or disadvantage they experience. The book includes contributions from academics in seven countries, presenting research conducted in eleven national contexts and also the 'between' spaces of online communications and mobile working. The fifteen chapters in the body of the collection look in detail at new work and work activities in a range of occupations and locations in the global workforce, exploring changing forms of governance, the coping strategies adopted by the workers in order to manage difficulties and life circumstances, and their understandings of the possibilities, trajectories, identities and potential rewards that they accept as the new normal. Drawing upon empirical research, the

collection explores how contemporary work is marked, even for the privileged 'middle class', by the "ordinary as an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on" (Berlant 2011, p. 8).

In the chapters in this collection, unsurprisingly, no single feature dominates the new normal of contemporary work and employment. Instead, many changes contribute to the shifting work experiences discussed in the research studies, from the use of digital technologies, with the ever-expanding possibilities they offer, including for mobilities and potentially limitless locations of work, to the rise in 'own account' working (International Labour Organisation, 2015), and the associated entrepreneurial and creative values which have become a prescribed coping mechanism around contemporary work and work arrangements. However, perhaps the most significant feature to emerge in these studies is the affective weighting attached to personalised and increasingly individualised work, and the motivation this provides for a shift in how people _want_ to work and how they organise their lives. Moreover, this motivation has repercussions for the difficulties that people accept, such as the ways in which organisations are increasingly operating in the name of giving staff 'what they want' by winding back infrastructure and placing greater emphasis on shared and/or flexible work patterns in order to decrease running costs. These affective aspects of the new normal, and the subtle forms of self-exploitation and exploitation they give rise to, are yet to receive the critical attention they warrant.

A number of themes cross the various studies. Inevitably, there is a strong **temporal** focus in accounts of change. Academic studies have labelled many of the transitions linked to new work and employment, for example, as millennial or 21st century, post-Fordist or neo-liberal. Those accounts often have a negative emphasis, as if the experience of contemporary working lives continues to be defined by what has been lost, including (ideals of) experience-linked remuneration, predictable career progression and the benefits of secure employment. In contrast, policy and media accounts tend to be highly positive about work today, invoking progress, including through the future focus of the contemporary model figures of the entrepreneur and the creative worker. For example, a recent UK government review on working practices commends 'the UK's successful record in creating jobs, including _flexible jobs which open up work to people with different needs and priorities_' (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2017, p.7: emphasis added). Within this collection,

workers' own experiences of pathways of change are the particular focus of Part III on transitions and transformations, but the temporal theme appears throughout.

In keeping with the near constant and contingent negotiations of Berlant's new normal, there is also a theme of **context**. Some chapters discuss the impacts on individuals of changes occurring at the level of the state, such as austerity policies and reduced spending on welfare. For example, the privatisation of formerly state-provided services has produced new social service entrepreneurs (see Vadelius, this collection). The relevance of context has of course been transformed by the digital technologies that are central to so much contemporary work. Although **digital working** is implicated with almost every occupation (Huws, 2013), its subtler effects are still being explored, including the emergence of digital occupations, like blogging and vlogging, that are so new they are not always recognised <u>as</u> work. The possibilities of digital working include the interconnection, and separation, of virtual and physical spaces, such as mobile working and new forms of workspace sharing, such as coworking spaces. Yet, despite its ubiquity and acceptance as part of the new normal, digital working has not erased the importance of more conventional **sites** of work. For example, home-based employment exploits the affordances of the online marketplace and is sought out by many workers, especially women, for the work-life flexibility it offers, despite the relatively low income that it usually provides. But conflating the site of paid work with home potentially comes at the cost of the work intruding into the still-relevant physical spaces of domesticity and personal life. Site is also relevant to creative workers outside 'advanced economies' (International Labour Organisation, 2015) who do jobs which are defined by an international creative sector, and probably exist because of the global reputation and celebration of that sector, but their working conditions are still set by their national locations, including within the 'radically tumultuous and uncertain institutional and societal contexts' of post-socialist nation-states' (Alacovska, this collection).

Another strong theme in the collection, linked to the previously identified affective weighting, is the **personalization** of work. Older boundaries between a worker identity and a private self or subjectivity are eroded when work entails **emotional and affective labour** (Gregg 2011; Hochschild 1989; Luckman 2015) and when formerly personal and private areas of life become monetized in new forms of 'social reproduction' (e.g. Jarrett 2016; Weeks 2011). A number of chapters look at the implications of transforming amateur engagement into professional work, or home life into business. The normalising of

connections between work and non-work, professional life and formerly personal aspects of people's lives are of course central to academic accounts of **creative working** (the focus of Part I). Creativity is both an economic 'good' associated with the global sector of the cultural and creative industries, and an aspiration for workers in many new occupations. The compass of the creative sector is widened by broad definitions (e.g. Fuller *et al.,* 2013), with the resultant near-impossibility of specifying all the occupations which belong within it. Digital working has also given rise to new understandings of creative practices and creativity. Taylor (2015) discusses a recent discursive drift through which creativity has become more generally associated with 'own account' working (self-employment, freelancing etc) through the model figures of the entrepreneur (Bröckling, 2016) and the creative maker or auteur (McRobbie 1998). As a consequence, creative work practices potentially appear desirable for freelance or self-employed workers in any area or occupation, shaping their working lives. Chapters in this collection show how the affective discourses of desirable creative and entrepreneurial work, and the identities they make available, drive many of the choices workers make, and are being increasingly exploited as motivators, for example, to maximise worker productivity.

The collection shows how the aspects of new working lives encompassed in these themes are engaged with and negotiated, managed or lived around as the new normal of workers' experience. Transitions have indeed occurred within various research participants' working lives – for instance, from employment to self-employment, leisure pastime to work (or almost work) – but they are often accepted as unremarkable by individual workers themselves, even though for an academic observer the details may be strikingly worthy of comment, and the socio-economic implications still to be fully drawn out. One indication of workers' increasing acceptance of change is through their take-up of education and training in new skills, including self-study materials, like 'how to' guidance (discussed by Cross; Lesage; Ashton and Patel, this collection). These processes of upskilling themselves contribute to different criteria for expertise, creativity and professionalism, and even wholly new occupations.

Arguably, however, the ultimate theme of the collection is the patterns of **advantage and exclusion** which operate around work today. The chapters show the discursive and organisational persistence of the division which characterised an earlier 'normative model' of work (Huws, 2013) distinguishing masculine activities of paid employment in a formal workplace from the unpaid activities of social reproduction' historically carried out by women in the home. That division remains relevant to women attempting to combine home-

based working with family life, for example, and more broadly to the feminized emotional labour entailed in communication and relating to others, as Cross notes (this collection).

Some chapters suggest that new occupations and work arrangements do offer advantages, like a sense of control and achievement through different working arrangements (Vadelius, this collection) and even a successful blurring of life-work boundaries to the extent that the claims of family life can take precedence over those of work (Biese and Choroszewicz, this collection). However, the inequalities of contemporary labour markets are well-recognised (e.g. Oakley, 2013) and it is important to acknowledge that the collection is dominated by the experiences of middle class people from advanced economies whose privilege continues to advantage them in the world of new work, including through the choices that are available to them regarding how to manage the interface between paid work and life. Clearly, this privilege is not distributed evenly and the collection explores some of the forms that it takes. For example, Allan (this collection) discusses the new 'classed privilege' which provides more access to debt, including student loans, which is justified as an investment in the future. Like the unpaid internships, with their widely acknowledged problems, which have become common in the current context of high unemployment (and especially youth unemployment) in many countries, such debt is an example of the difficulties faced by career entrants, and the young more generally. Other chapters question the misleadingly 'democratic' associations of digital working, challenging the common assumptions that there are low entry barriers to new digital occupations like blogging (Mäkinen, this volume) and vlogging (Ashton and Patel, this volume).

The situations presented through the studies in this collection are still in progress, and those positive experiences that are discussed have been achieved through struggle. Most of the workers are qualified professionals in high earning fields who have some options and room for compromise as they navigate the new normal. Their decision-making, however, does indicate that even the privileged are not always happy with the status quo or the changes occurring as a result of larger shifts in working lives. That these relatively advantaged workers are still operating in a world of substantial trade-offs can only start to offer some insight into the pressures of the increasingly stressful, uncertain and intrusive experience of the new normal of work for those with less wriggle room to negotiate it on their own terms. Thus, what starts to emerge clearly here in the pervasiveness of increased self-employment and the widened uptake of entrepreneurial identities is that, rather than individualistic responses to the grind of the new normal, new forms of collective identity and action are

clearly required, perhaps driven by greater mutual consciousness-raising and sharing of disappointments and desires.

The sections and chapters

The collection is organised into three sections corresponding to key themes and aspects of the workers' experience. The chapters in Part I centre on **creative working**, the chapters in Part II discuss **digital working lives** and the chapters in Part III explore **transitions and transformations.**

The chapters in Part I approach creative work and creativity from a range of theoretical and disciplinary positions and draw upon empirical data to critically analyse what is at stake now as a result of the maturation, or 'settling down', of creative working lives. In Chapter 2, *Online selling and the growth of home-based craft microenterprise: The 'new normal' of women's self-(under)employment*, Susan Luckman and Jane Andrew find Berlant's 'cruel optimism' in play within the craft economy in the situation of Australian women who run craft micro-enterprises, selling their products online and face-to-face. In a discussion of empirical data generated by a three-year study of design craft micro-enterprises, the authors suggest that at a time of growing employment uncertainty, shrinking arts funding, and widespread governmental policy emphasis on encouraging small business, the development of creative micro enterprises can be seen as part of a wider pattern of the privatisation of responsibility for a worker's economic position. The research indicates that the growth of craft self-employment is masking considerable un- and under-employment, especially among women. The ease of establishing a professional business profile, and the ability to network via social media as a marketing tool, provide nascent craft entrepreneurs with a sense of being real, sustainable, significant and justified in continuing down this path. However, the social and economic costs to individuals, families and the wider society of all this effort and risk-taking are profound and, the chapter argues, require greater attention as part of wider cultural and economic policy making.

In Chapter 3, *Hope labour revisited: Post-socialist creative workers and their methods of hope*, Ana Alacovska draws on sociological and anthropological theories of hope and hope labour to understand how creative workers manage their lives in the precarious post-socialist economies of Macedonia and Albania. She argues that hope entails more than future-oriented

instrumentalism and dream-like optimism. Hope is not only found in postalgic circumstances but also amidst conditions of hopelessness, because hope is needed to endure hardship. Alacovska outlines a theoretical framework for capturing the performative role of hope in sustaining creative careers amidst widespread precariousness and work casualization. The chapter approaches hope as an experiential category of being-in-the-world, and hoping as a practice of getting through the hardships of the concrete realities of work-life. The research discussed in the chapter is an interview study conducted with fashion designers, musicians, actors and new media workers in Macedonia and Albania.

Chapter 4, *From Visual Discipline to Love-Work: the feminizing of photographic expertise in the age of social media*, by Karen Cross, approaches the gendering of labour through a discussion of amateur and professional photographic practice. Taking up the concept of 'free labor' from Maurizio Lazzarato (1996), in the Italian postoperaist tradition, and also Tiziana Terranova (2000), the chapter discusses the trend toward relationality now defining digital labour. It looks at the shifting gender dynamics in a new aesthetic reframing of photography in recently published photography training manuals. The chapter adopts the formula of "love-work" to compound the previously neglected concerns of the amateur with professional values, and to express the new terms of social media practice as it promises to mitigate historical losses, especially those relating to the domestic and familial concerns of women.

Chapter 5 *Creative Labour, before and after 'Going Freelance': Contextual Factors and Coalition-Building Practices*, by Frederick H. Pitts also looks to postoperaist accounts, using the work of Sergio Bologna. In his discussion of freelance creative workers in the UK and the Netherlands, Pitts presents empirical findings to oppose the resonant discourses of liberation in postoperaist accounts of 'immaterial labour' and their modern proponents. He suggests that struggle is necessary to recapture creative activity from its imbrication in capitalist social relations. The chapter presents a case study to explore the movement of creative workers from formal employment to freelancing. It examines the struggle they wage to secure conditions within the commercial contractual relationship of freelance work which enable them to be creative in the way they initially desired. The chapter also explores the emerging forms of coalition-building in evidence among the freelancers.

Chapter 6 *Searching, Sorting, and Managing Glut: Media Software Inscription Strategies for 'Being Creative'*, by Frédérik Lesage looks ahead to the digital focus of Part II. The chapter

adopts Angela McRobbie's (2016) concept of the 'creativity dispositif' in an account of how media software enables and constrains contemporary creative practice. The chapter explores how the software used for creating, editing, and sharing media content can both enable and constrain what it means to 'be creative'. The chapter introduces 'glut' as a software inscription strategy, examining how glut is operationalised for the widely used software Adobe Photoshop, and for instruction about the software in an online learning platform.

Continuing the technological focus, the chapters in Part II explore new occupations, work arrangements and workspaces which are being normalised through digital working. 'Mom blogging' is a growing field of women's work, in which motherhood and personal narratives intersect with paid work and micro-entrepreneurship. In Chapter 7 *Negotiating the intimate and the professional in mom blogging*, Katariina Mäkinen investigates how mom bloggers in Finland build personal brands that rely on their lives and identities as mothers, and also their skills and experience as professionals. Presenting research findings from interviews and a virtual ethnography, the chapter addresses the 'new normal' of blogging, investigating how the monetization of everyday life, the construction of public displays of subjectivity and the dissolving of parenting into work, and vice versa, are negotiated by the bloggers themselves as an everyday part of living, working and parenting.

In Chapter 8 *Vlogging careers: everyday expertise, collaboration, and authenticity*, Daniel Ashton and Karen Patel discuss a variation on blogging, vlogging, as an increasingly visible and normalised form of cultural work. They argue that how-to guidance and journalistic coverage overstate the accessibility of vlogging careers and obscure the various forms of expertise required, including the underlying strategies vloggers use to engage their audiences, for instance, by interacting with fans and collaborators, and the skills they require to stage a relatable authenticity. The chapter analyses the social media presence of four prominent vloggers.

The focus of Chapter 9 is the mobile information and communication technologies (mICT) that enable knowledge workers to be available 24/7, wherever they are. In this chapter, titled *From presence to multipresence: mobile knowledge workers' densified hours*, Johanna Koroma and Matti Vartiainen introduce the concept of 'multipresence' to describe how workers on the move can be simultaneously present in different physical, virtual and social spaces. Exactly how multipresence is experienced depends on the specific technology,

context and situation involved. The potential benefits are increased flexibility and more efficient use of time, while the costs include interrupted concentration, stress, reduced productivity, and problems with life management and work-life balance.

In Chapter 10, *Affectual demands and the creative worker: Experiencing selves and emotions in the creative organization*, Iva Josefsson discusses the emotion talk of workers at a video game development studio in Sweden, examining the affectual demands of their jobs. Such demands may serve organisational interests, functioning to discipline an organisationally desirable, committed and engaged worker, but at times they prove problematic for the workers. The chapter shows how the creative discourses in play in this context collapse the distance between self and work. This not only heightens the sense of personal meaningfulness for the workers but also disables their attempts to keep some distance from their working lives.

Coworking spaces first appeared in San Francisco in 2005 but are now found all over the world. In Chapter 11, *Coworking(s) in the plural: coworking spaces and new ways of managing*, drawing upon research in Italian coworking spaces, Silvia Ivaldi, Ivana Pais and Giuseppe Scaratti critically examine this form of workspace organisation and its associated values and practices, such as collaboration, reciprocity, community, and sustainability. Identifying multiple types, rather than a singular model, of coworking, they trace out four predominant forms of organisational structure and culture, suggesting that coworking is giving rise to new ways of working and managing organisations. The chapter presents research conducted in Italy.

The chapters in Part III explore trajectories of change within some contemporary working lives, and the extent to which the transitions are establishing new relations to work, including new occupations. The first chapter in the section, Chapter 12*, "Investment in me": uncertain futures and debt in the intern economy* by Kori Allan, looks at the situation of people who are still at the point of career entry. Presenting findings from ethnographic fieldwork with interns in Canada's publishing and journalism industries, the chapter argues that the promissory value of meaningful work facilitates enthusiastic self-exploitation despite low or no wages. While interns resent 'grunt work' as just free labour that should be waged, they view meaningful work as a future-oriented investment in their networks and skills. Interns also recognise, however, that only the privileged can afford unpaid internships. As contingent work has

spread to the middle classes, privilege is not necessarily constituted through secure employment, certain futures or higher wages, but rather through differential access to opportunities for self-appreciation.

The next two chapters look at novel forms of entrepreneurship. 'Lifestyle-based entrepreneurs' are self-employed people who work from home and have moved into entrepreneurship to live a certain lifestyle and escape insecure wage work. In Chapter 13 *Letting them get close: Entrepreneurial work and the 'new normal'*, Hanna-Mari Ikonen looks at the example of home-based businesses in Sweden and Finland that host the 'dog hobbyists' who participate in dog training in rural settings. In this new entrepreneurial work, production, reproduction, and consumption blur together as the hosts' entire lifestyle becomes commercialised. Despite individualised risk, the entrepreneurs remain optimistic that they have the resources to make real their fantasies of living the 'good life'.

In Chapter 14 *Self-employment in elderly care: a way to self-fulfilment or self-exploitation for professionals?,* Elin Vadelius looks at the situation of people who were previously employed in large health and social care organizations and who now run small or medium-sized businesses in the elderly care sector in Sweden. The chapter investigates their reasons for becoming private providers of publicly financed and regulated welfare services, and their experience of this situation. The political arguments for creating markets in public services are that competition and entrepreneurship contribute to greater innovation, diversity and freedom of choice for the elderly, and that deregulation can provide women with better opportunities to realize their visions and ideas by starting own businesses. The chapter explores the participants' experiences of success, or non-success, as self-employed and private providers of home care, and their feelings about the transition, which include pride and achievement but also defeat and failure.

In Chapter 15, *Creating alternative solutions for work: experiences of women managers and lawyers in Poland and the USA*, Ingrid Biese and Marta Choroszewicz suggest that mainstream career models no longer correspond to how contemporary individuals want to live and work. The authors argue that for women who attempt to combine a career with family or care responsibilities, prevalent masculinist career models are especially problematic. The chapter presents the stories of two women, a lawyer from Poland and a manager from the USA, who questioned traditional definitions of success in order to create

lifestyles that provide them with a greater sense of authenticity and control. The women left mainstream career models to take up alternative work arrangements that combine different areas of their lives while still drawing on their skills and potential. The chapter suggests that these life changes were successful and that by opting out of an established way of working, the women adopted new mindsets and practices that better accommodate their wants and needs.

In the final chapter of this section and the whole collection, Chapter 16, *Beyond Work? New expectations and aspirations,* Stephanie Taylor discusses the possible emergence of new norms, aspirations and expectations attached to work. She presents an analysis of interviews with UK artist-makers which suggests that these people value their creative practices as 'not work' and as offering personal associations and forms of fulfilment which they regard work as unable to provide. The chapter argues that earlier understandings of work based on a masculinist 'factory' model not only persist but have extended into all occupations, reinforcing negative associations of meanings and affects, so that even the educated and qualified middle class do not expect to find self-actualisation and personal reward through working.

Whose 'new normal'?

The craft makers discussed by Luckman and Andrew (in Chapter 2), the creative freelancers studied by Pitts (Chapter 5), the bloggers and vloggers in the chapters by Mäkinen (Chapter 7) and Ashton and Patel (Chapter 8), the professional hosts researched by Ikonen (Chapter 13), the satisfied welfare entrepreneurs in Vadelius's study (Chapter 14) and the professional women discussed by Ingrid Biese and Marta Choroszewicz (Chapter 15) – what these and other contemporary workers all appear to have in common is an ambition to follow their own values and, even more, to organise their own lives in their own ways. This freedom is prioritised over the more conventional rewards of financial success, to the extent that, for Taylor's participants (Chapter 16), it prompts a turning away altogether from work in order to pursue an alternative practice. That ambition is, of course, the dream of the privileged. Their advantage is relative but the collection reasserts that privilege in contemporary life is gendered, (middle) classed, (middle) aged and geographically circumscribed. In the small number of studies that explore the normality of those outside these privileged positions, it does not seem to be a coincidence that Alacovska, discussing the workers in failing post-

socialist economies (Chapter 3), and Allan, considering the circumstances of younger people who are struggling to begin a working life (Chapter 12), both centre their accounts on 'hope' as almost the converse of possibility. The remainder of the research participants inevitably experience some constraints, but their dreams of control and freedom at least seem achievable. As Laurent notes, 'norms of self-management ... differ according to what kinds of confidence people have enjoyed about the entitlements of their social location' (p. 5).

Without wanting to universalise middle class experience and aspirations, we suggest that this privilege can reveal more widely and deeply held aspirations around, and deficits within, the contemporary experience of work. Indeed, what emerges from these rich and varied empirical studies is precisely a picture of Berlant's 'cruel optimism' (2011); that is, a picture of paid work as increasingly organised around new normals of hope and promise that become an 'obstacle to flourishing' (p.1) as within different employment arrangements the promise promotes the intensification of labour and, too often, an acceptance of limited reward for large effort. Like Berlant, we have found that the 'subjects of precarity' tracked here in terms of their experience of work 'have chosen primarily not to fight, but to get caught up in a circuit of adjustment and gestural transformation in order to stay in proximity to some aspirations that had gotten attached to the normative good life' (Berlant, 2011, p. 249). Negotiating both practical and affective relationships to this tension is the new normal of work.

Acknowledgements

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