

Precarious Habitus: Insights from Working and Living Precariously in Auckland, New Zealand

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Abstract

The following article introduces a new concept of *precarious habitus*. Based on workers-centred responses from the qualitative research on work and precarity, situated in Auckland, New Zealand, the article focuses on a relationship between precarious work and precarious life that creates the *state of precarity*—a mode of domination and structural marginalisation on the one hand, and a broader existential condition of uncertainty and social vulnerability on the other. The article reveals both structural constraints that precarious workers, particularly the Māori precariat and migrant workers, face on a daily basis, and the making of certain social dispositions that workers internalise in order to get by. The article emphasises three dimensions of precarity that create precarious habitus: structural constraints of precarious work, the making of precarious habitus in relation to migrant worker exploitation and marginalisation, and the price of escaping precarity by adopting certain social dispositions.

Key words: precarious habitus, precarity, precarious workers, Māori precariat, migrant workers

Introduction and study context: Precarity in New Zealand

This article investigates everyday struggles and structural constraints of living in precarity, focusing on how precarity is experienced and reproduced. Based on primary data from semi-structured interviews with precarious workers, it aims to add a critical dimension to the theories of precarity, particularly in relation to social processes that are marked by precarious work, crisis-shaped subjectivities, and relations of domination (Berlant, 2011). As an ethnographic excerpt from a broader study on work and precarity situated in Aotearoa New Zealand’s largest city, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, the article presents seven precarious workers, summing up the main findings from the research on *the making of precarious habitus* (Galic, 2019).

The article reveals the making of certain social dispositions—a habitus of precarity—that precarious workers internalise to get by. *Habitus* is a system of social dispositions embodied in a person’s patterned tendencies to think, act and feel in determined ways (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 61). It reveals how certain social structures and processes become embedded inside persons as habitual (rationalised and naturalised), particularly in the form of everyday thoughts, accustomed skills, actions, practical forms of knowledge and even emotions (Wacquant, 2016, p. 65). Habitus signifies an interplay between social structures and social practices that are perceived as natural in our everyday lives (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 256). Because it is “both structu-*red* (by past social milieus) and structu-*ring* (of present perceptions, emotions and actions)” (Wacquant, 2016, p. 67), habitus reveals how structural constraints and regularities of social reality become embedded in a person’s dispositions through experience and socialisation (Barker, 2016, p. 667).

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Considering the conception of habitus, this article points to both structured and structuring dimensions of precarious work and life, emphasising social conditionings, shared perceptions, and deeper meanings of precarity as a mode of domination and social control. It emphasises that precarious habitus arises from the state of *precarity*—a mode of domination based on the creation of a generalised and permanent state of insecurity (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 85; Casas-Cortés, 2014, p. 212). According to Isabell Lorey (2017), precarity signifies relations of domination and social control, designating “conditions of legal, political, economic and social inequality ... the conditions of domination that are divided up and distributed through protection, care, and safeguarding” (p. 200). As a condition of systemic uncertainty and social vulnerability, it encompasses both precarious work and life. This particularly applies to imposition and normalisation of precarious work arrangements characterised by low pay, various forms of insecurity (income, employment and work) and the lack of protection (Standing, 2011, p. 10). Precarious work, for example, is identified in employment relationships “where the burden of adjustment falls on the worker, and the inequality of power in the employment or contractual relationship disadvantages the person doing the work” (New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, 2013, p. 3). These arrangements can be found in workplaces where workers are employed as temporary agency workers (employed by a hiring company but performing work for a client-company), subcontractual self-employed workers, part-time workers or casuals. The last category are employed on an as-and-when-required basis, lacking a regular work pattern and no guarantee of work (New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, 2013, p. 52).

Precarity is a condition that is overwhelmingly present in numerous societies around the world (International Labour Organization, 2015). Having a precarious, insecure job correlates with a present era of what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) calls “liquid modernity”, when every aspect of social life becomes uncertain, insecure, even systematically dangerous for the well-being of workers and their families (see also Matthewman (2015)), or what Sennett (1998) names “the new age of insecurity”. The latter particularly applies to implications of precarity beyond employment relations, pointing out weakening social ties and solidarity, forced flexibility and the imposed imperative of self-improvement. In a new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005), the burden of responsibility is removed from the state as a protector of the public good to each individual who has to ‘swim’ in a sea of competition, self-trade and the survival of the fittest. Precarity, therefore, appears in relation to neoliberalism where every aspect of work and social life becomes measured within market principles and cost effectiveness (Wacquant, 2012). However, as theorists of precarity assert, precarity should not be understood as a neoliberal phenomenon but rather as a condition inherent to the historically oppressed and exploited working class and underclass (Lorey, 2015; McIntyre, 2011). Historically, precarity appears as a norm rather than exception in capital-labour relations (Marx, 1976, p. 786), and simultaneously as the politics of precarity where capitalist profits and social control become assured through division of labour into primary (secure) and secondary (precarious) labour forces (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008, p. 54).

One of the main characteristics of the politics of precarity is that it has historically targeted women, migrants, Indigenous communities and other disadvantaged social groups (Lesutis, 2022, p. 4; Lorey, 2015, p. 22). As a mode of domination and social control, precarity appeared (and still appears) particularly in colonial and neocolonial contexts. In settler-colonial societies like New Zealand, the making of precarity was embodied through structured dispossession, ranging from land confiscation and the imposition of precarity through legislations (such as land acts), to forced proletarianisation, meaning a process of transforming Indigenous peoples in self-sufficient communities into dispossessed workers who must sell their labour in order to survive (Wynyard, 2017). Hence, it is not a coincidence that in contemporary New Zealand, Māori are over-represented in precarious work, low-paid jobs and unemployment (New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, 2013, pp. 24–26; Stubbs et al., 2017, p. 117). Because of the critical connection between precarity and social harms such as poverty, crime, addictions, suicide and deteriorated physical and mental health (McIntosh & Curcic, 2020), Māori scholars point to the “mode of Māori precarity” (Uerata,

2021) and the existence of the “Māori precariat” (King et al., 2017). According to King et al. (2017, pp. 125–126):

Māori have experienced precariousness since at least the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, when increased European settlement and eventual confiscation of Māori lands resulted in oppressed and marginalised people ... For almost two centuries now, colonisation has created what we now term the Māori precariat, populated by whānau [extended families] who not only live with the loss of traditional lands, resources and social structures, but also suffer from insecure work and unemployment, as well as housing and food insecurities.

With the neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, precarity gradually entered the New Zealand labour market. Blue-collar workers—over-represented by Māori and Pacific Peoples—were particularly vulnerable to processes of privatisation, outsourcing and ‘optimisation’ that were based on systematic reduction of labour costs (Poata-Smith, 2013). Many New Zealanders in manufacturing and other industries lost their jobs, and in 1992, the unemployment rate for Māori and Pacific Peoples reached a staggering 27 per cent, compared with 8 per cent among Pākehā (New Zealand Europeans) (Bargh, 2007, p. 31). Precarity appeared as a condition of social inequality, where the burden of ‘market adjustments’ and ‘the flexible labour market’ fell to already marginalised communities. Whereas the Employment Contracts Act 1991 and the Employment Relations Act 2000 legalised a widespread use of precarious work (by allowing triangular employment relationships and zero-hour casual arrangements), the restructuring of social welfare decisively cemented precarity among the most vulnerable social groups (Poata-Smith, 2013, p. 151).

Migrant workers have struggled with precarity as well. From Chinese miners in the nineteenth century, who were subjected to a poll tax and exempted from the national pension scheme, to Pacific Peoples migrant workers, who went through the traumatic experience of dawn raids in the 1970s, many migrants, particularly non-European, have experienced discrimination and marginalisation (Galić, 2019; Ip & Pang, 2005). Today, the exploitation of migrant precarious workers continues to be a significant issue. According to research led by Christina Stringer (2016, pp. 21–35), the exploitation of migrant workers is alarming and ranges from forced labour and various forms of wage abuse (non-payment and underpayment), to different elements of deception and occupational violence. Stringer asserts that workers have been exploited by immigration recruitment agents from countries of workers’ origin and, particularly, by New Zealand employers. Migrant workers have been subject to extreme exploitation by not being paid for hours worked; excessive working hours without breaks; physical, sexual and psychological abuse; poor working conditions; and withholding of documents. Because migrant workers and Māori are over-represented in precarious work, the research on work and precarity in Auckland, on which this article draws, continues the exploration of the politics of precarity that appear in the form of structural violence and marginalisation (Lesutis, 2022).

Taken together, the article points to the systemic process of the making of precarious habitus that encompasses structural constraints of precarious work, marginalisation and the everyday struggles of living in precarity. As part of my doctoral research, I conducted qualitative research on work and precarity in Auckland, New Zealand. The main research questions of this particular study were: How do precarious workers get by? How does precarity impact their everyday lives? What are their struggles? And what are their aspirations?

Methods

To explore the everyday struggles of precarious workers, I contacted two unions who sent invitations to their precariously employed workers. I also placed an advertisement on the university campus and in social media outlets in order to find non-unionised workers. As a result, I conducted 26 semi-structured interviews with precarious workers working in various industries, ranging from retail and hospitality to arts and

education. The interviews were held in union offices, on the university campus, and in four Auckland cafés. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. The call for research participants, participant information sheet and consent form were, along with the ethics application, confirmed by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee.

I approached the semi-structured interviews through a particular subdivision of grounded theory: the *problem-centred interview* (Witzel, 2000). This method opens space for participants to express their thoughts, perceptions and emotions, while the task of a researcher is to navigate the interview around the main research problem. Furthermore, a problem-centred interview encourages a dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee, meaning that researchers are allowed to express their position or experience (Witzel, 2000, p. 2). Because I was precarious worker, this method helped me significantly; participants became relaxed, passionate and critical, sharing their personal troubles, everyday struggles and aspirations. When interviewing Māori and Pacific Peoples workers, I also respected Ngahuaia Te Awetotuku's guidelines for conducting deep interviews, which are discussed in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) decolonising methodologies: respect your subject; interview face to face; look, listen, then speak; be a good host to your interviewee; be careful and caring; and do not place yourself above the interviewee. Because of my responsibility of giving voices, interpreting events and developing theory, this article includes some longer quotes from those dialogues.

In reflecting on the interviews, I noticed that my combined outsider status as a non-New Zealander (international postgraduate student) and insider status as a precarious worker (working two precarious jobs across Auckland city) resulted in my being able to forge a very good rapport with the research participants. I was afraid that being a foreigner would result in participants being unwilling to openly talk about their everyday struggles at work. It did not. I was also aware that it is the researcher who has power over the data they receive. I remembered my friend—a former inmate and ex-gang member—telling a story about his experience with a researcher, emphasising the interviewer's patronising position and how he felt that the interviewer did not understand him or the issues being discussed. Hence, following my position of a working-class scholar, along with acknowledging the importance of a standpoint perspective (Eakin, 2010), I decided that I would approach the interviews by framing the participants as my co-workers or people I know. This approach—influenced by Witzel's (2000) dialogues—resulted in mutual respect and solidarity between the participants and myself, and significantly enhanced the richness of the data. At the same time, I was careful not to be suggestive. Adopting Witzel's and Eakin's approaches led to some participants requesting that I carry their voices forward: “Do something for us! Be our voice, because the majority of us don't have a voice. We want to speak out, but we can't,” said Penina, a fast-food restaurant worker.

Data were analysed through thematic analysis and focused coding, which “refers to taking earlier codes that continually reappear in your initial coding and using those codes to sift through large amounts of data” (Charmaz, 1996, p. 40). For this article, seven participants (out of the 26 interviewed for my doctoral research) were chosen based on this depth-frequency model—underlying the most comprehensive testimony of a particular theme that is also stated by other participants. In this process, particular themes appeared more significant, emphasising the main issues of the making of precarious habitus: (a) structural constraints of precarity, (b) marginalisation, and (c) the making of a neoliberal subjectivity. The research participants who appear in this article are Ngaire (Māori working student), Jackson (non-European migrant worker and postgraduate student), Sanjay (Indian migrant worker in a supermarket), Abbie and Charlotte (Pākehā precarious workers in hospitality and sales), Penina (Pacific-Māori working student), and Ria (an actress whose unique combination of ethnicities could reveal her identity). All the names in this article are pseudonyms, to ensure the participants' anonymity.

Structural constraints of precarity

Sometimes I do sacrifices with other things so that I can pay rent and live. When I have a really intense week, when I'm exhausted, that kind of drains me. And the last three months I have been really sick and the doctor thinks it's stress (Ngaire).

Ngaire is Māori working student in her early twenties whose everyday life is marked by a struggle. Trying to navigate study and work, she often feels exhausted and burnt out. She lives in an Auckland neighbourhood where many people struggle with precarity and marginalisation. A visitor can observe large churches, schools and a colourful township with beautiful Pacific shops, flowers, small convenience stores and bakeries. However, the same streets also host a disproportionately high number of liquor stores, betting outlets and fast-food restaurants and takeaways. There is a group of homeless people hanging around while groups of young males frequently pass through in loud cars and motorcycles. Ngaire observes that some of her peers are high-school dropouts and that some younger males have found their future in gang activities. Others work either in fast-food restaurants and bars or in a nearby shopping centre. She is only one of two from her high-school class who attends university, striving for knowledge and educational credentials in order to escape precarity. On her street, Ngaire observes many social harms associated with New Zealand's colonial past, which has a critical impact on present social issues:

What I see in my community? A lot of typical things as a result of colonisation, like broken families, poverty, fighting culture, gangs, drugs and alcohol abuse, physical abuse, domestic violence. Just walking through the streets feels unsafe, a lot of dogs, lack of community engagement, not many people know who their neighbours are. Not much dreams or aspirations for your future, a lot more living day to day.

Every morning, Ngaire takes a train into Auckland's CBD. Her love for her South Auckland community convinced her to pursue university studies in order to become an expert in Māori development. However, to get by and have enough money to pay rent, Ngaire works three jobs. All are precarious and characterised by employment insecurity (she is employed through casual contracts that—in practice—do not guarantee regular work hours and standard employment relations), income insecurity (lacking adequate and stable income) and work insecurity (fluctuating hours). Ngaire emphasises that she is constantly under pressure, trying to navigate work and study, which seems impossible due to fluctuating hours and the on-call nature of one of her jobs:

I'm anxious because I never know what next week will look like in terms of work, which is annoying and a bit scary, too ... One of my jobs [care work] is casual so it's just whenever they want someone; they just call. It's probably the most difficult one because they can call like at midnight or they can call while I'm working another job which they often do. My other two jobs, in one I'm an assistant which is also casual. One week I can get like two hours of work or I can get ten hours, which is the max. And then the third job is just like receptionist kind of stuff. It's different all the time. It varies from zero to 30 [hours].

[Interviewer: How do you cope with that?]

I have no idea [laughs] ... It's pretty stressful because there's no stability when I can pay rent. I mean, I always pay rent because I also get living costs [from the state] but if I wouldn't have that, I would be dead [laughs].

Ngaire's experience reveals structural constraints of precarious work that leads to precarity: working fluctuating hours on minimum-wage rates and de facto no rights or protection. Because she is employed through casual contracts, employers are free to redefine work tasks, to refuse or limit access to standard benefits, or to offer shifts only when needed. In other words, Ngaire lacks a regular work pattern and her

shifts are never guaranteed. A worker on a casual contract might only work one shift in the entire week if the employer decides so. Working three casual jobs while studying is, therefore, a very difficult task for working students like Ngaire.

Occupational violence appears to be a widespread issue across the New Zealand workscape (Boocock et al., 2011, p. 136). A particular form of it is favouritism. *Favouritism* is a management strategy of subtle occupational violence where the number of shifts, promotion possibilities and the employment as such depend on a worker's obedience and particular social dispositions. At the time of the interview, Ngaire had just left the job in retail where she had worked for almost three years. She emphasised that the issue of favouritism, tied to allocation of work hours, was the main reason that she left a job.

The management had favourites, and if you weren't the favourite, you could feel how the manager was bitchy to you, like treated you differently. They put you on a shitty job or they gave you less shifts; that was really common. So they gave us shorter shifts or less shifts and on shitty days or shitty times ... When I was not a favourite, I was getting maybe five hours a week.

Ngaire notes that those co-workers who were most servile to managers received better hours and regular shifts. On the other end, workers who did not redress their behaviour to 'entrepreneurial' and individualistic neoliberal character (which habitually reduces solidarity among co-workers) were dealing with occupational violence while being placed in situations of inadequate health and safety practices:

'Cause I've been there so long, co-workers always came to me with their issues, and I suggested just talk to this person; it can help you or tell them so that they're not abusing you.

[Interviewer: Abusing you in what way?]

Not physically but mentally: not paying us enough, making us do shifts we couldn't do, so taking advantage of that. There's a lot of guilt tripping that goes on. Like, if someone is sick, they say the right words to you: "Oh, you are a really good worker and we really appreciate your value." So they tell you what you wanna hear. Eventually, you come to work. They used to do that to me all the time when I was new. For example, one time I had food poisoning and they made me come to work. I couldn't even stand.

State institutions are critical agents of the politics of precarity (Lorey, 2015). They often force the unemployed and working students to accept precarious work arrangements. One of them is Charlotte who was "sort of pushed" to precarious work by the New Zealand's social welfare institution, WINZ (Work and Income). Charlotte is a subcontractual commission-based worker. Being a salesperson, her income depends solely on the sales she makes. Like Ngaire, she works on-call, meaning that she finds out about her roster a day before her workday or sometimes even on the same morning. "They call me in the morning and say if they want me or not," says Charlotte, emphasising irregular shifts, fluctuating hours and the struggle to navigate work and study. On an average day, she may work three, four or eight hours, depending on the company's needs or the manager's good will. When her income is calculated in relation to hours worked, Charlotte earns about three quarters of a minimum wage. She wants to quit this job (also because of a subtle sexual harassment she experiences from her manager), but at the same time, she does not want to go back to WINZ, which offered her—or rather, pushed her—to accept a commission-based job:

I sort of felt like whatever job is given to me I should take it. So I got accepted and I thought, "Oh, this will be good." And at first I didn't realise that there was no base salary, so if you don't sell any of the products you make no money. I found out from other people that were working there that a lot of them had also been recommended from Work and Income to apply

for that job. So they had sort of pressured us; like, “Your benefit’s going to be cut off if you don’t get a job.” So they also felt they had to take that job.

Charlotte’s experience illuminates a problematic practice by this state institution; namely, that WINZ directly colludes with employers in putting workers onto the road of precarious work. WINZ appears as a place of conditional help or, more correctly, a system of *workfare*. According to Wacquant (2012, pp. 71–72), this coincides with a wider shift from ‘protective welfare’ to ‘corrective workfare’ under which social assistance is made conditional upon submission to employment, including unpaid work experience programmes and precarious jobs. The state-crafting of precarious work signifies an instrument that serves as a basis of capital accumulation (for companies), social regulation (for the state), and the making of precarity. In other words, it is through the state’s compliance with business interests where precarity decisively captures and colonises workers’ lives (Barchiesi, 2015, p. 21). Charlotte’s experience with WINZ demonstrates the critical point of the ongoing process of the making of precarious habitus. The pressure to accept precarious employment by institutions of workfare—that often also require the unemployed to participate in workshops that propagate the entrepreneurial spirit—paves the way to internalising social dispositions marked by precarity. The state is, therefore, directly involved as a holder of institutional and definitional power that denigrates the issue of precarity by tolerating and promoting precarious work (Wacquant, 2013).

This process is further strengthened in particular workplaces. Because precarious workers lack employment, income and work security, managers are able to impose rules and conditions without any resistance. Charlotte reveals: “I feel that the boss has been playing on peoples’ insecurities, knowing that we are in financial strife. There’s such pressure to make sales; so if you don’t make any targets, you’re not getting paid any money.” Furthermore, Charlotte and her co-workers are forced to become precarity predators, too. For example, the manager directs them to sell their product in the poorest parts of Auckland. “Because they will believe whatever you say,” was his answer to the question why South Auckland is the best place for sales. In Charlotte’s words, “He’s keep telling us to target poor Brown people because he says that you can feed them with any rubbish about the product and they will buy it.” She is very hesitant to do that but, because of her financial situation, Charlotte feels she needs to be there, “trying to make some money”.

Charlotte’s testimony implies a deeper dimension of precarious habitus among commission-based workers who—being underpaid and vulnerable themselves—end up taking an advantage of other vulnerable people in society. Again, the employer’s increased profits based on exploitation of people’s vulnerabilities have been made possible exclusively through the assistance of the state; in this case, by WINZ. Charlotte’s example, being one of many similar ones in this research, demonstrates a wider impact of precarity. On the one hand, structural constraints of precarious work create the state of precarity among workers who have to cope with irregular shifts, fluctuating hours, de facto no rights or protection, and occupational violence; and on the other hand, social settings of precarity impose certain behaviours and actions that workers would normally not do if their employment was giving them an anchor of stability and certainty.

Experiencing precarity of migration and marginalisation

I have a permanent contract but they are including more casual staff [rather] than giving full-time employment to us. They are reluctant to give full-time hours. I’m employed part-time. They give me 22 hours [per week] so this job is not giving me security. My wife is also working in the supermarket. She has been working there for the last 10 years and she has the same problem. They don’t want to give full-time fixed contracts.

[Interviewer: Did you ask them if they could give you a full-time contract?]

Yes, so many times. They said, “Yes, next time, next time,” but it’s now the tenth year. They are not giving hours. (Sanjay, migrant precarious worker)

Sanjay works as a check-out operator at one of Auckland's supermarkets. His wife also works part-time. They moved from India to New Zealand to look for a better life and prosperous future for their two school-aged children. However, the family cannot survive on two part-time incomes. Sanjay, therefore, has a second and third job: one as a subcontracted taxi driver for a ridesharing corporation and another as a night cleaner of business offices in the Auckland CBD. He works between 45 and 50 hours per week. Sanjay's average working day starts at 5.30 in the morning, by offering taxi services. At 9 a.m., he starts his part-time job in the supermarket. And in the evening, he works an additional four hours cleaning offices. Sanjay and his wife are highly educated (they both hold university degrees) but since they have moved to New Zealand, they never got a chance to work in the fields of their expertise. They have been precarious ever since.

Migrant workers constitute a significant proportion of precarious workers. Hoping to stay in the country, they are more likely to accept low-paid precarious jobs than are local workers (Collins & Stringer, 2022). Because of the international division of labour, many workers from the system's periphery are forced to leave their homes and migrate to privileged countries like New Zealand. Once migrants leave their home towns, the new chapter begins: a struggle to find a job, paying various fees to the destination country (such as medical examinations), court translations of education credentials, or obtaining a New Zealand driver licence (Galic, 2019, p. 132). Moreover, many migrants pay between NZD15,000 and NZD60,000 to immigration agents in their home countries who promise workers to assist them with obtaining New Zealand residency (Stringer, 2016, p. viii). For migrants, returning to their country is often seen as a regression, or as Sanjay asserts, a personal failure. In desperation, many of them, therefore, end up working jobs that they would not in their home country.

Sanjay and his wife came to New Zealand with work visas and, since then, have obtained New Zealand residency. They are the 'lucky ones'—only 17 per cent of migrant workers on work or student visas are successful in gaining a permanent residency (Walters, 2018). Sanjay emphasises that they had to start from the scratch, trying to earn enough money to get by. While working precarious jobs, they have been applying for jobs close to their fields of study. However, they realised that employers who offer non-precarious jobs prefer local workers over migrant ones: "It is very difficult. First of all, nobody accepts migrants here; unless you have reference from here, nobody wants to recruit you. That's the main problem. I worked for the multinational bank in India. I applied for a job in a bank here but never got a chance," says Sanjay, who has been disappointed by the lack of opportunities.

To escape from precarity, Sanjay invested significant amounts of money to study information technology (IT) at one of Auckland's private educational institutions. After graduation, he applied for jobs in the IT sector: "Most of the time, no interview. I got an interview once, but further, no." Sanjay feels that his ethnicity might have an impact on that: "They say that we don't have racism in New Zealand, but racism is there. It's not so obvious but it is there." He often meets highly educated young migrant workers from non-Western countries working in places like gas stations or hotels. Sanjay adds: "My wife has same struggles, same situation. She graduated from commerce, worked in accounting; we both have experience but here, no. We have tried everywhere. The bank sector said that I have the experience for management level but they are not ready to give me job as a teller." This points to the embedded social inequalities and downward social mobility of non-Western migrants that persist in Aotearoa New Zealand (Stringer, 2016).

Jackson, a postgraduate student and precarious worker, provides a similar example regarding precarity and marginalisation. He shared his experience from the job interview he had for a secure job in the public sector. Jackson was well prepared and the interview went well. The interviewer liked his presentation, but at the end of the meeting, Jackson got the following feedback: "The answer was kind of, 'Well, we are looking for someone who really knows the local situation.' The key word was 'local'." Jackson says that he cannot prove that his name, African accent or even the colour of his skin has something to do with his unsuccessful job applications; however, the pattern is obvious. Jackson understands this issue through historical and critical lenses:

New Zealand as a country has always valued immigrants from the UK, Western Europe and North America who fit within the White establishment and Eurocentric values. There's definitely hierarchy there. You can see at the university where we are right now; immigrants that are employed here come mainly from the United States and UK and that is not a coincidence. It is very much shaped by the history of this country. It is not being talked about it; that's what concerns me.

Many non-Western migrants find it very difficult to find a non-precarious job in New Zealand. This issue has also been confirmed by investigative journalists. For example, Jackson's experience corroborates closely with the media-reported case of Michael Macdeba, a Nigerian migrant with a PhD in Engineering from the University of Auckland, who could not find a non-precarious job in New Zealand. Despite Macdeba's strong work experience as an engineer in Nigeria, he worked as a security guard in Auckland's CBD. He applied for 500 jobs related to his expertise and never got called for a single interview (Christian, 2018).

Migrant workers' testimonies reveal that precarity is a driver of perpetuating social inequality. Precarity always emerges relationally where certain social groups are exempted from precarious work and life at the expense of others. In Jackson's words, "Certain groups of people make sure that they are not put in this situation." Instead of dealing with everyday precariousness together—with fairer distribution of wealth, labour and responsibility—capitalist ventures and privileged social groups shift their own risk and precariousness onto workers (Lorey, 2017). It is at this point where precariousness becomes precarity, signifying the systematic condition of social vulnerability and a mode of domination.

Neither Sanjay nor Jackson can afford holidays. Living in precarity signifies everyday life in 'survival mode'. For Jackson, the "priority is basically to survive first. So what informs my week is what can I afford to pay this week in terms of bills. Everything else follows after that." Sanjay emphasises expensive rents and their inability to afford their own house: "I always think about how many hours I will get this week. According to it, every week my wife and I have to fluctuate hours and to budget," says Sanjay, pointing to extremely high rents in Auckland. "We can't buy a home; even to have enough to rent a big wooden house ... the cost of living in Auckland city is very high. If you don't have fixed full-time hours, it is very stressful. That's why I have to do other jobs, odd jobs ... I'm very tired but there's no other way because in Auckland the rent is constantly going up."

Navigating work and everyday commitments within a sphere of destroyed work-life balance represents a constant struggle where "you have to constantly keep in mind what's in play" (Jackson). Jackson's use of the word 'play' (or playing the game) is very interesting because it implies Bourdieu's notion of habitus where a person must feel or 'sense the game' in order to deal with relationships within particular fields (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 66). In relation to precarity, a person must sense the game and prioritise certain commitments while having skills to get resources for the household to get by. Budgeting appears as a crucial survival strategy here. But there is also another dimension of the making of precarious habitus that can be identified: in order to escape precarity, a person is required to adjust their behaviour, to work even harder and fight for themselves, no matter the social cost. Both Sanjay and Jackson put extra effort into their work, hoping that this will be recognised by their managers or colleagues, but they also agree that some people around them might say that they only care for themselves.

Playing the game and adopting a neoliberal subjectivity

Living in survival mode points to the final dimension of the making of precarious habitus: the price of escaping precarity by adopting certain social dispositions. Precarious workers either accept precarity as something given (some workers often become bitter because of it) or as a site of a struggle where they compete for secure jobs and promotions. This is particularly evident when a worker is promoted into a supervisor's or manager's role. Abbie, a waitress in a hotel, observed that when the manager was a worker

like her (they were co-workers in a food and beverage team), his behaviour was very different: “He was cool, but he went to be a manager and he changed; his attitude changed.”

Abbie is a Pākehā woman in her late twenties. She is employed through a part-time contract, working 25 to 35 hours per week. She usually works evening/night shifts, mostly 5 p.m. to midnight and sometimes midnight to 8 a.m., excluding irregular on-call shifts. Because of these unsocial work hours, Abbie does not see her young son often. She has very good customer reviews and throughout the years in the hotel, she has worked very hard. However, although she has put extra effort into her job in order to gain promotion, her work has not been acknowledged by her manager.

I love my job, but I’m not satisfied because I wanted to be a supervisor. I’ve been trained; I’ve been there for two and a half years. I don’t want to be a waitress for all my life. So I put forward to my manager last year that I want to be a supervisor and he declined it. He said I needed to train more, be more punctual and then this year I would be put forward again. I was getting heaps of really good feedback from guests and staff, so he was like, “Okay”. He goes, “If you do a few things, I will put you forward; I just want you to be more dedicated to the hotel, be more reliable and be an example; like, be a leader.” So I said, “Okay, I want to do that.” I came pretty much every day. I worked six days every week this year. I organised the staff barbeque by myself, which was for 40 people. I organised everything from food to set up everything, while I was doing six days. I also did some extra work in hotel. So I was pretty confident with what I’ve done, but then he turned around and said, “Oh, actually, I feel that you need to practise more.” I was like: “Are you serious?” And there is another guy who hasn’t done anything extra for the hotel and the supervisor’s role was then handed to him.

[Interviewer: So he said, “You have to be more reliable”? What does that mean?]

He said, “You have to be more dedicated to the hotel.” What more do you want from me? I see you more than my son!

In this excerpt, Abbie reveals not only the issue of favouritism analysed earlier but the imperative of self-improvement which is systematically imposed in order to exploit workers even more. Workers become engaged in beyond-job practices of learning, training and socialising with co-workers and managers. By making themselves totally available, either because they are forced to by the employer or ‘voluntarily’, a person’s private and public spheres become indistinguishable. Abbie admits that she is constantly thinking about her job, either in terms of its structural constraints (being precarious) or in terms of self-improvement, trying to climb the company’s hierarchical ladder and get a job in the morning schedule so that she will finally be able to see her son more often. “I do, I think a lot about work. I’m one of those who stresses about everything; like, I try to organise a lot because I want to be a supervisor. When I go to work, I always think, like, what will I do different today?”

The pressure to sense the game requires a person to adopt social dispositions that align with dominant forms of neoliberal social subjectivities: to be individualistic and completely servile to the management; to ‘go the extra mile’ and do everything for the job (including blaming yourself in case of failure); and to conform with exploitation and subtle forms of occupational violence where possibilities of collective redress are reduced to a bare minimum (Berlant, 2011). A dialogue with Ria provides an insight to this problem. Ria is a self-employed professional actress, a drama school graduate. She tries to find her way in the highly competitive field of theatre and television. She works contract to contract. Although she does not suffer from systemic precarity like the other participants in this article, elements of precarity are present in her daily work and life:

It’s really hard. It is stressful because when you’re doing the job, the job usually isn’t that long. So if you do quite a big theatre production, you might be employed for like three months, and then if you’re lucky enough, the show comes back around and you tour again. It’s stressful

because it's kind of a rollercoaster: you have heaps of work and then it's massive debt ... When the show ends you might not have another contract for another how many months, so while that show is going you still have to be hustling for other stuff because you know it's gonna end soon. So you always have to be looking for work; you can't ever just take a break. It's hard.

Māori, Pacific Peoples and other non-Pākehā actors like Ria are struggling in a Pākehā-dominated social field where many actors, writers or directors come from wealthy socio-economic backgrounds. As a young actress who does not come from a privileged family, Ria feels she has to try even harder in order to be competitive enough. She must sense the game and become an entrepreneur:

We just don't have enough money to back ourselves, so that's the main struggle. So we want to make work but we don't have enough money and all the support. Like, you're not taught as an actor how to run a business, but it is what you end up doing; it's what we have to do. If you wanna make it, you have to do your books, rehearsal spaces, do your accounting, apply for funding all the time, be a good writer; you have to do your full budget.

[Interviewer: So, like being an entrepreneur?]

Yes, every single person is like their own individual company. You have to think about yourself as a business; you know, how to sell yourself, how to deal with facts and figures, make yourself sound big fuckin' legit. But in the lower levels, we don't know how to do that. Those who always get the money, the privileged, they are really eloquent, organised, they know money, they know what to do with it, how to crunch the numbers to make things work in a budget that looks awesome. They know the system; they know the language so when they apply for funding they get it.

Ria's experience demonstrates both structural constraints of the social field and the imperative to become an entrepreneur in order to sense the game. Trying to be one of the few who succeed in a social field where the privileged are ritually settled, artists are forced to subordinate themselves to the rules of the field: think as an entrepreneur, become a *homo oeconomicus* (Foucault, 2008), a neoliberal subject who measures and is measured by their value on the market. Trying to sense the game, therefore, puts workers in the difficult position of navigating their ways within the structure of the field. The issue of favouritism further exacerbates domination and represses solidarity among workers: "You soon realise that people are very competitive. And some people can be real shitty. They will deliberately not help you; they just don't want you to take their jobs, so they bitch about you," says Ria, emphasising that because of competition, actors rarely stand in solidarity when a director abuses them. This includes the possibility of discussing common problems with other actors in the team: "You have to be very careful what you say because it gets back; you know, that's dangerous for your employment opportunities." Everyone is competing against everyone else, which further signifies the forced emotional labour of faking solidarity, such as expressing to each other that everything is alright. In other words, actors have to constantly 'be aware what's in play', to accept domination with a smile and be on the stage literally and figuratively. In Ria's words: "Everyone is playing the part ... everyone has their own agenda at the end of the day. Everyone knows it is about who you know. Everyone is playing the game."

Although precarity appears in different contexts and to a lesser extent, workers like Ria experience elements of precarity with its relations of domination. She says that a person eventually learns how to play the game, accepting the imperative of networking and other social dispositions within the field: "You kind of get used to it, to be honest." Ria tries to navigate structural constraints in the field, but at the same time, to continue with her dreams and ideas. However, with being under pressure to stay in the game, adopting competitive social dispositions (precarious habitus) and working extra hard to get a new role, precarity

appropriates her life. She is not struggling with poverty like many precarious workers, but the threat of being without a job remains omnipresent.

Ria, Abbie, Ngaire and Charlotte are all struggling with sleep deprivation and constant illness. Ngaire's positive orientation quickly changes to sadness when she breaks down and cries about her precarious reality. Abbie's eyes are very tired, too; although she is a fighter, she admits that she sees 'the medicine' to precarity in alcohol: "I have beer. I drink when I come home, like, in the middle of the night when my son is in bed. I drink by myself, watching TV ... If it was a bad night I would have, like, six beers. If it's not so bad, I would have one or two." Precarity carries its price.

Concluding thoughts

[The] precarious situation disables solidarity or the sense of community. Everybody has to survive; there is no solidarity anymore because the precarious situation doesn't cultivate that. Solidarity that we see is superficial because it is not supported by institutions and by the culture, but what the system does support is the feeling of anxiety, the feeling of uncertainty. (Jackson)

Precarity signifies a site of constant tension among precarious workers to escape from precarious reality. This article finds that the price of the upward trajectory results in a cycle of struggling to escape precarity while accepting it as an inevitable and natural part of a person's work and life. Working hard to obtain a non-precarious job paves the way to overworked and burnt-out bodies and minds. It requires workers to accept exploitation and enter a socio-Darwinist game of competition. However, as the structural constraints of precarious work suggest, trying to sense the game and escape precarity requires the worker to conform to precarity and its relations of domination, which often includes exclusion of those staying in the precariat. The issue of favouritism and rewarding the most obedient workers is evidence of this. Hence, the price of upwards mobility signifies imposed conformity as a rite of passage into a non-precarious life. This includes a person's subordination to the opportunistic entrepreneurial spirit in the pseudo-collective job environment, marked by a constant internal competition that benefits the employer. It is important to emphasise that this is a systemic process—Bourdieu (1990b) calls it the "symbolic violence"—that cannot be reduced to the characters of individual workers.

A person's habitus is therefore completely precarious, fragile and marked by everyday struggles of living in survival mode. Precarious workers live in constant fear and anxiety. They become crisis managers with the knowledge that this crisis might never end. Precarious habitus is, therefore, constantly changing, being structured by structural constraints of precarious work on the one hand, and structuring by everyday precarious life on the other.

An ethnography on work and precarity in Auckland revealed the active process of the making of precarious habitus, characterised by precarious work, marginalisation and everyday struggles. It points to the creation, reproduction and normalisation of social dispositions marked by precarity and its mode of domination. A habitus of precarity signifies a serious social harm issue that intimately translates to deteriorated health and other social harms associated with it. Precarious habitus should, therefore, be addressed at all levels in order to transform it: in academia, policymaking, grassroot organisations and by society as a whole.

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