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## **Dynamics of precarity among ‘new migrants’: exploring the worker-capital relation through mobilities and mobility power**

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## **Dynamics of precarity among ‘new migrants’: exploring the worker-capital relation through mobilities and mobility power**

### **Abstract**

This article conceptualises the role of mobilities within precarious working and living conditions, drawing on qualitative analysis of interviews (n=52) and a policy seminar (n=50) in North-East England. It focuses on refugees, asylum seekers, and Eastern European EU migrants, as policy-constructed groups that have been identified as disproportionately concentrated in precarious work. The article develops three ‘dynamics of precarity’, defined as ‘surplus’, ‘rooted’, and ‘hyper-flexible’, to conceptualise distinct ways of moving that represent significant variations in the form that precarity takes. The article concludes that understanding precarity through mobilities can identify points of connection among today’s increasingly heterogeneous working class.

### **Keywords**

asylum, refugees, UK, precarity, EU, migration, mobility power

## **Introduction**

Precarious conditions of work and life, or ‘precarity’, have received increasing attention across a number of disciplines and fields, including Sociology, Geography, migration studies, labour studies, and urban studies (e.g. Standing 2011; Meehan and Strauss 2015; Jirón and Imilan 2015). Precarity has been identified as characteristic of the experience of growing numbers of people, yet highly varied in its intensity and form. This article examines precarity among a particular subset of the population (new migrants) in a particular place (North-East England), and uses a focus on mobility to conceptualise differences and points of connection between varied forms of precarity. Through this analysis, the article draws attention to: (a) capital’s simultaneous reliance on migrant labour en masse and migrants’ disposability as individuals; (b) the importance of migrants’ lives beyond the workplace for understanding the way mobilities are exercised; (c) the significance of mobility as both a central characteristic of precarious work and a field for workers’ agency.

The article draws on empirical research during 2013-2016, using in-depth qualitative interviews with 40 migrants and 12 practitioners, and a policy seminar. This project focused on migrants from the ‘EU10’ countries<sup>1</sup>, refugees and asylum seekers<sup>2</sup>, all of whom are included in the definition of ‘migrant’ adopted by the United Nations Statistics Division (2013). These migrant categories were selected because they have all been stigmatised, have had their mobility problematized by significant sections of the media and political establishment (Philo, Briant and Donald 2013; Allen 2016), and exhibit concentrations in various forms of precarious, low-paid work and worklessness (Lewis et al. 2014; McCollum and Findlay 2015). These categories also present significant differences in countries of origin, immigration status and associated rights, and employment patterns. While there is a growing literature considering patterns of mobility/immobility associated with specific immigration categories (e.g. Alberti 2014; Andrijasevic and Sacchetto 2016; Bräuchler and Ménard 2017; Zhang 2017), there is a lack of research that looks across categories. This article addresses that gap by exploring differences and similarities across UK immigration categories, adding to literature such as Jordan and Brown (2007). This approach calls into question the rigid binaries, such as ‘free versus forced’, which often dominate discussions of migration (Lewis et al. 2014), while still retaining a focus on the influence of immigration categories in structuring mobility. Shifting the focus beyond particular immigration categories lays the groundwork for connecting discussions of mobility with conditions of exploitation affecting

other sections of the population. This offers a distinctive conceptual contribution, by reaching beyond the migrant/native divide and emphasising the centrality of mobility for all labour exploitation.

The article begins by summarising migrants' position in Britain's workforce and introducing the concepts of precarity, mobility and mobility power that shape the research question. The context of North-East England is then introduced, followed by the research methodology. The findings section develops a typology involving three 'dynamics of precarity' among research participants, using a qualitative thematic analysis. The article concludes with a discussion of the benefits of applying a mobilities lens to precarity and suggests that such an approach can help identify points of connection among an increasingly heterogeneous working class.

Britain's uncertain future relationship with the European Union threatens further changes, but these are beyond the scope of the article.

### **Migrants' position in the workforce**

Inequalities between and within countries play a significant role in shaping migration patterns. Bloch and McKay (2016, 5) note 'uneven opportunities to migrate, with border controls aimed at excluding some groups while the global elite can move freely; the growth of forced migration as a consequence of North/South relations and the need of capitalism for low-paid and often precarious workers'. The details of the international power relations underpinning these differential mobilities are beyond the scope of this article, but are described further in Lewis et al (2014) and Vickers (2019). International inequalities in wages, conditions, state support and overall standard of living encourage some migrants to accept wages and conditions that are poor by Britain's standards, but compare favourably to their country of origin (Anderson 2010). Britain's economy has an ongoing structural reliance on migrant labour (Anderson and Ruhs 2012), concentrated in sectors including hospitality and catering, construction, health and social care, food processing, agriculture, and domestic work (Clarke 2017). The British state has actively intervened to shape migration according to the needs of the economy, articulated in recent decades as 'managed migration' (Jordan and Brown 2007). Policy-constructed categories, such as 'EU migrants', 'refugees', and 'asylum seekers', can be de-humanising and mask internal diversity, but are useful as a starting point for analysis to foreground the role of immigration controls in shaping labour (Anderson 2010).

Although there is significant diversity among EU10 migrants, overall since the EU10 countries joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 their citizens' migration to Britain has been characterised by: high rates of employment; long hours; concentration in insecure jobs; low wages; and downward class mobility (Stenning and Dawley 2009; Sporton 2013; McCollum and Findlay 2015). Their access to state welfare has been limited compared to British citizens, increasing pressure to accept whatever work is on offer or to leave the country. EU10 migrants are disproportionately concentrated in agency employment. The Agency Workers Directive introduced in October 2011 allowed agency workers 'equal treatment' with employees, but only after a 12-week qualifying period in the same job, incentivising short-term hiring by employers (Sporton 2013).

Many refugees in Britain have high levels of motivation to work and relevant qualifications, yet as a group they have high rates of unemployment and those in work are disproportionately concentrated in low-paid, low-status jobs (Phillimore and Goodson 2006; Fletcher 2011; Vickers et al. 2016). Most asylum seekers awaiting the outcome of their application, and all those who have been rejected, are prohibited from taking paid work, meaning that many of those who do secure leave to remain enter the labour market as long-term unemployed.

Further comparisons between these categories of migrants and the general population can be made using the Survey of New Refugees, which included 5,696 refugees during 2005-2009, and the Annual Population Survey, which identifies those born in Poland, which accounted for the largest number of EU10 migrants during this period. Data from these sources is included in the Appendices. Comparing those between the ages of 16-64, this data highlights high rates of unemployment and temporary work amongst refugees, low average wages for Polish workers, and disproportionate concentrations of both groups in sectors and roles associated with low-paid, low-status and insecure jobs. Additionally, relatively high proportions of Polish workers who reported looking for paid work in the previous four weeks despite high employment rates suggest low job satisfaction or perceived job security in their current work.

### **Theorising precarity and the labour process through mobilities**

A mobilities lens is used here to explore precarious conditions among new migrants. Jørgensen (2015, 3) suggests that ‘Broadly speaking, the interrelated concepts [of precarity, precariousness and precariat] refer to decades of neoliberal policy hegemony resulting in flexibilization of the labour markets, insecurity, uncertainty and risks across social strata’. This broad definition is adopted for the purposes of this article. Precarity takes many forms, and has been understood as process, political practice, performance, tendency, category, structural condition, and state. A focus on mobilities offers one way to make sense of this multiplicity.

Unlike Standing (2011), who associates precarity with the emergence of a new ‘precariat’ class as part of a post-Fordist<sup>3</sup> epoch, we agree with those such as Mitropoulos (2006) and Munck (2013), who point out that precarious conditions have been the norm historically and globally for most people living under capitalism. Nevertheless, there have been significant social and economic transformations in recent decades, producing particular experiences of insecurity that are both part of a generalised tendency for growing numbers of people, and cluster socially and geographically in ways that lead to qualitatively distinct experiences for particular groups (Waite 2009).

Attention to labour process (Braverman 1998; Smith 2006), situates precarity within labour-capital relations. As Alberti (2014) notes, labour process scholars have devoted significant attention to the ‘elasticity’ of labour, in other words labour’s ability to produce a greater or lesser quantity of value in a given amount of time. Marx conceives of labour as ‘setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of [their] body’ (1890/2003: 173). His labour theory of value builds on this, suggesting that profits rely fundamentally on control over the movement of human bodies, to extract the maximum production for a given wage. Capital, commodities and labour must all move to function, but more fundamentally the transformative, productive capacity of humans can only be realised through dynamic activity, and directing human activity to the production and capture of surplus value requires control over that activity. Mobility, defined as ‘something that moves or is *capable of* movement’ (Urry 2007, 7), can thus be seen as fundamental to the labour-capital relation and a useful lens to examine precarity.

Building on the connections Eriksson, Hane-Weijman and Henning (2018) draw between geographical mobility and sectoral mobility, and Kesserling’s (2014) analysis of mobility and

power, we consider mobility here in three interrelated senses: job mobility, representing movement between waged labour roles that sometimes also involves movement between employers or sectors; geographical mobility, which may range in scale from local to international movements; and the dynamic exercise of labour power, in the Marxian sense of the capacity to work, the motion of arms and legs, head and hands, directed within the labour process according to employers' needs. At times, the distinction between these mobilities blur, reflecting their shifting interconnections.

Frequent job mobility, or at least the constant threat of it, may be seen as a fundamental feature of precarity. Weak commitment by employers toward individual workers, evident for example where an employer avoids investing in training because they do not expect workers to stay in the same job for long, can contribute to insecurity. In some cases, workers may reciprocate with a lack of commitment to a particular job or even a particular sector. This can manifest in low levels of intensity and consistency of work, or a lack of investment in the development of job- or sector-specific skills and knowledge. It may also have the opposite effect, with insecurity putting pressure on workers to engage in skills development beyond their paid hours and to work more intensively, in the hope that this will solicit greater employer investment in the worker (Smith 2006). As Alberti (2014) shows, relationships between employer expectations, mobility, and workers' agency are highly varied. Job mobility does not inevitably translate into precarity, with the outcome resting on the degree of agency afforded to the worker and the availability of other sources of support outside the waged relation, as scholars of social reproduction have highlighted (e.g. Meehan and Strauss 2015).

Geographical mobility also features prominently within the literature about precarity, albeit often implicitly, through a focus on international migrants as distinctively precarious subjects (e.g. Casas-Cortés 2014; Lewis et al. 2014; Paret and Gleeson 2016; Jørgensen 2016); although there is less discussion of migrants' *within-country* mobility. Multiple factors associated with migration can be understood as contributing to precarity, but do not derive inevitably from migration itself. Rather, as Anderson (2010) argues, international structural inequalities combine with state policies to produce conditions of precarity as part of the same process of immigration controls that separates workers of different countries and places them within different labour regimes (also Wills et al. 2010; Jones 2016). In some cases, states explicitly restrict the length of stay for specific immigration categories, imposing a form of

forced mobility in jobs and geography that sustains an ever-present mass of labour while creating a constant churn in its membership. Varying knowledge about labour norms and rights can also play a role, particularly where their immigration status is insecure, and where union membership is lower. This may be compounded by language differences. Anderson (2010, 308) shows how age demographics and the presence or absence of family members are also shaped by immigration controls, with visa requirements and restrictions on access to public funds making it more likely that migrants in some categories will be young and without dependents, increasing their capacity to work long hours including evenings and weekends. Reduced access to state welfare on the basis of immigration status also plays a role, as an intensified manifestation of a wider trend of workfarist welfare reform that makes state welfare conditional on engagement in waged labour. This has increased ‘labour market competition, especially in the low-wage and insecure segment’, which ‘translates into workplace discipline through the well-known mechanism of insecurity’ (Greer 2016, 165,170).

Within a labour process frame, precarity can be theorised as the net effect of a set of conditions that shift power toward capital, to ‘stretch’ labour and increase absolute surplus value through more intensive work and longer hours, and to increase relative surplus value, by reducing wages. Insecurity can act as a lever to compel workers to take responsibility for disciplining their own movements according to the needs of capital. Within this struggle between labour and capital, mobility represents ‘a double terrain of control and resistance against the precarious conditions of life and work’ (Alberti 2014, 878). Mobility between places or jobs can facilitate the rearrangement of workers into positions that increase their exploitation through increased control by employers over movement within the labour process, or alternatively can increase workers’ ability to resist. The decisive question is therefore not whether mobility occurs, but under whose direction and the extent to which it is shaped by the interests of labour or capital.

We use ‘Mobility power’ to express the agency of workers to direct their own mobility, in all of the above senses – between jobs, between places, and within the labour process. This expands on its use by Smith (2006), to describe movement between firms. Whereas Smith (2006) uses mobility power to describe workers’ agency in moving between jobs, as one element of the labour process distinct from effort, mobility power is used here holistically, to describe workers’ control over their movement between places, between employers, and



within the workplace, understanding all three forms of mobility to be interconnected. Defined in this way, mobility power also determines workers' control over how much effort they expend. It can be seen as the antithesis of labour discipline exerted by capital. Mobility power may be employed by workers to stay just as it may be exercised to move. This is consistent with Lewis et al.'s (2014) definition of precarity through a continuum of unfreedom, but focuses the lens more specifically on freedom to decide whether, how, where and when to move. This enables an exploration of 'the tension between fixity and motion' (Gill, Caletrio and Mason 2011, 302), which is an important concern for mobilities research more broadly, with particular reference here to the labour process.

This discussion prompts a question that is central to what follows:

*What roles do mobility and mobility power play in the production of precarity among recent migrants?*

This will be explored through a focus on North-East England, in order to explore the interaction of international, national, regional and local factors. North-East England is a particularly interesting case due to the limited previous research on migration to the region, and the prevalence of precarious work within the region. It offers a significant addition and comparison to studies that have focused on a limited pool of English metropolitan centres (e.g. Wills et al. 2010; Alberti 2014; Cenci 2017), and highlights the significance of mobility even within a region that, despite significant recent increases, has had relatively low levels of international migration over the last century

### **The regional context**

This article uses the Office for National Statistics definition of North-East England, shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: Map of North-East England with English/Scottish border



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This includes significant urban areas of Newcastle, Sunderland and Middlesbrough, smaller yet historically important centres like Durham, coastal settlements, and considerable rural areas encompassing moorland, forests, undeveloped coastlines and agricultural land.

North-East England has a history of distinctive industrial work-based identities, socio-economic peripheralisation (Tomaney and Ward 2000), but also intra-regional inequalities (Hudson 2005). It also has a long history of in- and out-migration, which has contributed to ethnic diversity, particularly around the region's ports and related industries that were built on migration (Renton 2007). Yet overall, the region is less diverse than some other English

regions, for example the North West, East and West Midlands, London and the South East, and has often been portrayed as England's quintessential 'white highlands' (Nayak 2003). This has also contributed to a lack of established support networks and employment opportunities for minority ethnic groups in much of the region, and a relative lack of research even concerning longer-established groups, such as those identifying as South Asian (Nayak 2017).

Since the late 1990s there has been a general increase in regional diversity by ethnicity and country of origin that does not have a single cause. For example, the number of residents recorded in the Census as born in Eastern Europe increased by 359% between 2001 and 2011, and the number of residents born in Africa increased by 112%, arriving through a variety of migration routes. Available statistics suggest that people born outside the UK account for around 5.2% of the region's population (ONS 2015). Migrant settlement has been unevenly spread, with major urban areas such as Newcastle and Middlesbrough receiving larger numbers, while some smaller centres such as Berwick have become home to significant numbers relative to the total population of the town. This new migration adds to longer-established communities of migrants and their descendants.

Industries associated with chemicals, steel, shipbuilding and coalmining, which were previously central to the regional economy, have experienced long-term decline, leading to a low-waged economy dominated by service-sector and public-sector employment, alongside expansion in some high-tech industries, and a shortage of highly qualified workers (Stenning and Dawley 2009; North-East Chamber of Commerce interview). Since the financial crisis beginning in 2007, the region has experienced the consequences of austerity and welfare reform more severely than many other parts of Britain (Shaw et al. 2013; Clayton et al. 2015). The regional employment rate during February-April 2015 was 4.4% below the UK average and the unemployment rate in November 2015 was the highest of any UK region, at 8.8% (ONS 2016a). In 2014, the region had the lowest average gross disposable annual household income in Britain at £15,189 (ONS 2016b).

The intersection of this regional context with migrant categories associated with low-paid, precarious work informs the focus of this research, suggesting the possibility for particularly severe forms of insecurity and deprivation. Regional data on refugee employment is sparse (Crossley and Fletcher 2013) and administrative data and sources such as the Labour Force

Survey do not identify refugees who have leave to remain. One previous regional study of refugees (Fletcher 2011), suggests patterns of downward class mobility and deskilling. Research on regional EU10 employment has focused largely on Polish workers, including Fitzgerald (2005, 2007), Stenning and Dawley (2009), and Fitzgerald and Hardy (2010), and identifies widespread low pay and insecurity. Data is lacking for other EU10 migrants. There is also limited research on the changing regional context for migrants following the economic crisis and austerity measures (Fitzgerald and Smoczyński 2017 is an exception). This article helps to fill those gaps in the empirical data, while simultaneously developing a new way of conceptualising varieties of precarity as configurations of mobility/immobility.

## **Methodology**

The project that informs this article adopted a mixed-methods approach, drawing on Phillimore and Goodson (2006); this included a survey (n=402), qualitative interviews with migrants (n=40) and other stakeholders (n=12), and a policy seminar (n=50). The survey gathered data on objective indicators of labour conditions (reported in Vickers et al. 2016), which Braverman (1974/1998) argues are a prerequisite for understanding subjective dimensions of the labour process. These subjective dimensions were explored through qualitative interviews with 40 migrants. The 12 interviews and policy seminar with other stakeholders supported internal verification. This article draws primarily on the qualitative interviews to explore subjective experiences of precarity and the role of workers' agency, including indications of consent and resistance. The survey is also discussed here insofar as it formed a basis for recruitment of some participants in the qualitative interviews. For further reflections on the methodology see Clayton and Vickers (2017) and for other findings see Vickers et al. (2016) and Clayton and Vickers (2018).

The methodology followed the British Sociological Association 2002 *Code of Ethics*, including best practice in informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, and was scrutinised by a university ethics committee and partner organisations prior to data collection. Information sheets, consent forms and a summary of findings were translated into six of the languages commonly spoken among the target population.

In the absence of a reliable sampling frame for the target population, the survey used non-probability methods, similar to Bloch and McKay (2016), with purposive sampling from

multiple starting points, between January 2014-September 2015. Sampling aimed for diversity by locality, gender, age, immigration status, and country of origin. Responses were collected face-to-face via support agencies, drop-ins, migrant community organisations, ESOL classes, workplaces, and a small number online. The sample composition is included in the Appendices.

40 migrants participated in qualitative interviews between July 2013-September 2015, 27 of whom volunteered following completion of the survey and 13 of whom were recruited via referrals. The composition of this sample is shown in the Appendices. Six of the 40 interviews used an interpreter, and a second translator checked these transcripts for accuracy.

12 other stakeholders were recruited through a snowball approach between June 2015-May 2016, aiming for diversity in sector and migrant user groups. They included representatives of migrant organisations, voluntary and statutory service providers, a trade union and an employers' association. 50 people attended a policy seminar in June 2016 to discuss draft findings, including a wider range of stakeholders, representatives of the Department for Work and Pensions and the region's largest charitable funder, migrants who participated in the qualitative interviews, and academics. Focus groups were held as part of this seminar and were used to verify findings and support the development of conclusions and proposals presented in Vickers et al. (2016).

Qualitative thematic analysis of interview data drew on Bryman (2016), supported by QSR NVivo software. Analysis began with themes determined by the research question, followed by an iterative process adding additional themes that emerged from the quantitative and qualitative data, through several rounds of coding, interspersed with team discussions. Themes were summarised and reviewed, to produce a set of 18 themes and 200 nested sub-themes. The analysis presented in this article focuses on themes and sub-themes that relate to movement between jobs and between places, and experiences of work and worklessness. Biographical summaries were also produced for each of the 40 migrants interviewed and this informed contextual analysis of how different themes interacted within individuals' lives.

Limitations of this methodology included the likely sampling bias resulting from recruiting through service providers with a dedicated focus on migrants, which may have contributed to an under-representation of both the most-excluded and most-integrated migrants.

Furthermore, comparisons between sub-groups based around factors such as gender and country of origin was limited by the relatively small sample size, relative to its diversity.

### **Dynamics of Precarity**

Consistent with the literature reviewed above, our data indicated concentrations of low-waged work, unemployment, and various forms of labour-related insecurity among migrants in the region (Vickers et al. 2016), suggesting low levels of mobility power within the labour process. 'Mobility differentials' (Alberti 2014) were also evident, depending on respondents' position within what Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011, 229) describe as 'complex and variable landscapes of opportunity and constraint'. State policy, and the immigration categories it assigned to individuals, had a major influence on respondents' mobility power, for example by forcing asylum seekers to live in houses assigned to them as part of the 'dispersal' process and giving differential rights for EU migrants to access state welfare, compared to British citizens, which limited their ability to turn down jobs with poor pay and conditions. Yet immigration categories were not the sole determinant of mobility power. For example, there were indications that success in turning down 'bad jobs' and finding a 'better' job differed according to factors which also included employment status, age, 'race', gender, educational background, responsibility to family members, and access to local and transnational support networks (consistent with Alberti 2014; Lewis et al. 2014; Bloch and McKay 2016).

In this section three 'dynamics of precarity' are presented, which emerged through the thematic coding described above. The findings presented here concern configurations of mobility/immobility, evident within the data, which are emblematic of precarity as defined above. We term these dynamics: (1) the surplus worker; (2) the rooted worker; and (3) the hyper-flexible worker. This typology is not intended to encompass all forms of precarity, to correspond perfectly to any individual, or to imply a uniformity of experience among individuals, but is rather a way of making sense of trends emerging from the data. These dynamics represent *ways of moving* rather than descriptions of individuals. The data also showed other trends, including for example more secure workers and some individuals who had experienced precarity but had moved to less precarious positions, and in some cases away from North-East England, but these are beyond the scope of this article. Recurring patterns of factors influencing each dynamic can be identified in interactions of state policy, employer practices, social relations within and beyond the workplace, and individual agency,

within a context that has international, national, regional and local dimensions. These dynamics are thus both experiential and structural, offering a reading of human experience that is attentive to the categories produced by immigration policy without reducing migrants to them. While we cannot assume generalisation, similarities between our empirical findings and other sources cited here suggests a wider relevance for this analysis. In the discussion that follows, direct quotations from interviews are used to illustrate wider trends in the data.

### **The surplus worker**

‘Surplus’ movements are those currently unneeded by capital *as labour*, leading to a disconnect from the labour process that is often accompanied by a subjective experience of feeling ‘unwanted’ or being prevented from ‘contributing’. This dynamic is emblematic of many asylum seekers, having experienced forced migration internationally followed by forced dispersal within the UK, and legally prohibited in most cases from moving into paid work. This has given rise to multiple campaigns in which asylum seekers have demanded the right to work, since it was removed for the majority in 2002. This dynamic can also result from non-recognition of skills and experience gained in another country, or from health conditions that severely limit job mobility and consequently deny the financial resources necessary for further geographical mobility. This dynamic is characterised by severely restricted mobility power, in terms of geography, jobs and labour process, leading to states of subjection that can result in immobility but also contain potential for rapid enforced mobility, into waged labour and potentially to a different place. This expresses a latent form of mobility, or spare capacity in labour supply: today's unwanted workers are also a reserve for the possible needs of tomorrow. Limited employment opportunities within the region compound the effect that limited geographical mobility has on job mobility. Restrictions on job mobility power and geographical mobility power can thus be mutually reinforcing in rendering workers surplus to the needs of capital.

Asylum seekers’ labour power was rendered surplus, and thereby immobile, through the legal prohibition on work. The resulting frustration was expressed by Amina, who arrived in Britain from Pakistan in 2010:

‘It was really hard because a person who used to work and who never asked for anything to somebody else, you know, it becomes really very difficult when you suddenly realise that now you just have to ask for help... If I need to buy clothes for

my daughter, for example, I'll just think, oh my god how I will save some money...I'm just getting five pounds a day. It's so hard.'

Amina reported engaging in a range of voluntary activities, including highly-skilled work and long hours, which represented a mobilisation of labour power. Yet, because it was unwaged this work did not grant an entitlement to resources that could directly reduce precarity. For some, the prohibition on paid work while seeking asylum combined with the many stresses and uncertainties of the asylum process to have a detrimental impact on mental health, creating a further barrier to employment once they secured leave to remain. Some asylum seekers took paid employment despite being legally prohibited from doing so. This represented a clandestine mobilisation of labour power. It may bring some material reward but often on a very low wage, and often at the price of oppressive conditions, for example one participant reported being employed via an agency, paid at lower wages than other workers and denied the opportunity to progress to direct employment as other agency workers did. The precarious legal situation of such workers can make it particularly difficult to challenge exploitation due to the risk of discovery and deportation (Lewis et al. 2014; De Genova 2010).

There were also many reports, including EU migrants and refugees, finding it impossible to continue with their previous career, or indeed to access any work at all, because of a lack of recognition of skills, experience and/or qualifications gained outside the UK. This was confirmed by a worker from a local authority welfare advice service:

'it's increasingly difficult for people to get skills and qualifications from overseas recognized here, but I think even if they do, I think there are still the barriers of not having UK work experience, and references...so you enter at the bottom of the ladder, and it's really hard to climb up from that, regardless of what you did previously.'

While NARIC (the National Academic Recognition Information Centre) offers validation of qualifications gained in another country, many migrants are unaware of its existence and others are prevented from using its services because of high fees. Even skilled workers who had a legal right to work could thus be rendered surplus within the regional labour market. This was reported by some individuals within each of the immigration statuses covered by our research. This can be seen as a lack of recognition for their ability to move in particular ways, making a distinctive contribution within the labour process, resulting in the foreclosure of opportunities to move at all.



Surplus workers are left reliant on non-waged forms of support. Depending on their immigration status, access to state support may be limited, and universal services such as libraries and children's services have been severely curtailed by the public and voluntary sector cuts that have affected North-East England disproportionately, particularly since 2010 (Clayton et al. 2015). Mutual aid based on a shared country of origin is limited in some cases by the small numbers of co-ethnic migrants in the region, and by the diversity of their origins, while mutual support based around shared locality or class may be limited by confidence in English, compounded by cuts to funding and access for English lessons in recent years, and perceived competition for jobs and services. The surplus worker dynamic can be understood as a particular form of what Marx (1890/2003, 602) calls the 'reserve army of labour', including a latent surplus population in the form of those distanced from waged labour but potentially available to work, and a stagnant surplus population in the form of those in 'extremely irregular employment' because they cannot find more regular waged work, whose 'conditions of life sink below the average normal level of the working class; this makes it at once the broad basis of special branches of capitalist exploitation'. Yet while the reserve army of labour is commonly understood as a set of categories within which individuals can be grouped (e.g. Neilson and Stubbs 2011; Foster, McChesney, and Jonna 2011), we reinterpret the concept as a way of moving under constraint that is not necessarily limited to particular individuals who constitute a discrete labour reserve.

### **The rooted worker**

'Rooted' forms of movement arose from social or cultural attachments outweighing demands of the labour market to move geographically. This dynamic of precarity is characterised by participation in waged labour but with limited geographical mobility. In some cases, this resulted from workers exercising mobility power to remain stationary to pursue non-economic goals or in other cases from caring responsibilities or other non-waged commitments that constrained geographical mobility. For some, further geographical mobility would have enabled improved employment opportunities but posed other costs, such as the loss of support networks and community as well as the financial costs of relocation, all of which tend to increase where family members are present. Some asylum seekers also reported significant place-based attachments, although because of the prohibition on waged labour and the lack of choice within the asylum housing system there was not the same tension around whether to move to seek work.

Geographical mobility away from the North East was seen by many interviewees as a precondition for accessing better paid, higher status, and less precarious work, and for some this also promised non-economic benefits such as moving to a city with larger national, cultural or religious populations and associated services, or closer to family members. However, interviews demonstrated a range of non-economic attachments that led people to decide not to move away, and instead to remain in the region even though this meant more limited employment opportunities. Similarly, in Sporton's (2013, 454) survey of A8 migrants in Doncaster, where there were limited employment opportunities, 56% declared an intention to stay in the city and a further 11% said they planned to stay in Britain. Our respondents gave many non-economic reasons for choosing to stay, sometimes framed by the region and sometimes more locally, often based on social support networks for themselves and/or family members, aesthetic attachments to the region, or lifestyle factors such as a slower pace of life compared to big cities elsewhere. The variety of non-economic attachments is illustrated by the following quotations:

'it's beautiful, I like it. Of course, it has problems as any other part of the country... And by the sea I like that... Every time that I go to London...I see everyone running up and down...I said oh my God, really, you really want to move here?' (May, arrived from Angola in 2008 and secured refugee status)

'as a job, career, I would probably move away... But there is another reason...I have got a two-year-old [child], and then a new baby coming... I am just aware of how important it is, the environment where you are growing up. So it's not much pollution...and for kids growing I think it's a perfect place to live.' (Aleksy, arrived from Poland in 2005)

Beyond a simple preference to stay, some respondents described the prospect of moving *again* as a further traumatic displacement. For example, Marie, who arrived from the Gambia in 2013 and claimed asylum, suggested:

'I think people are just...scared of moving...this is the only place I know...If you should move me from here today, that's when you are killing me. I'll be starting from zero again, because it will be very hard. So people are running away from that now.'

A welfare rights worker we interviewed reported that in their experience single people tended to move on to other cities more than families, reinforcing the importance of familial connections in developing the kind of 'roots' described here, leading people to exercise geographical mobility power against the pressure to move according to labour market demand.

The rooted dynamic also arose from attachments that imposed limits on geographical mobility power, and consequently also job mobility power. Differentials in geographical mobility power were particularly affected by caring responsibilities, as demonstrated by the case of Anna, who arrived from Poland in 2005 as a result of her husband's employment and initially found work as a care assistant and cleaner, before moving on to interpreting via a friend:

‘[a friend] from Hungary, she was working with ... a company that was employing interpreters, like self-employed interpreters. And she said they are desperate for Polish interpreters straightaway. I rang and just got the job like that. So I was working for them for about eight months ... But after that I wasn't happy with ... the petrol money, because I had to go to [different parts of the region] and I had my little boy, I was breastfeeding, and it was hard for me, it was not possible, so I just said no more.’

At the time of the interview, Anna was out of work. This illustrates how attachments that limit geographical mobility power can also limit job mobility to the point of rendering workers surplus – although in some cases the impact of such attachments is significantly affected by access to other sources of support such as childcare. This is not necessarily related to being a migrant, and points towards commonalities based on socio-economic position that cut across migrant/non-migrant distinctions.

While there is a lack of comparative data on which to base firm conclusions about the distinctiveness of the North-East region, the importance of non-economic attachments to the region and/or localities within it in sustaining engagement with precarious conditions may be distinctive in that it appears to contradict previous research that focused on larger metropolitan areas. For example, Alberti's (2014) study of the hospitality sector in London found migrants valuing their temporariness and viewing their employment in London as part of a longer-term migratory plan (also Anderson 2010). In our research, place-based attachments contributed to some individuals' acceptance of precarious conditions, just as a lack of attachment did in Alberti's (2014) study. While many writers (e.g. Foster, McChesney, and Jonna 2011; Jones 2016), emphasise the coercive role of borders in maintaining differential regimes of exploitation, this suggests that in some cases subjective attachments to place that may be emotional, familial, social, and future-orientated can also contribute to the same outcome.

### **The hyper-flexible worker**

'Hyper-flexibility' refers to forms of movement that involve high levels of responsiveness by workers to labour market demands. This dynamic is characterised by a high degree of geographical and job mobility, constrained by the internal economic geography of the region. Sometimes this took the form of forced movements between work sites and jobs, and sometimes juggling of multiple jobs, cyclically or sequentially. This dynamic is consistent with the association Anderson (2010, 300) notes, between migrant labour and 'hyperflexible labour, working under many types of arrangements (not always "employment"), available when required, undemanding when not', although the other dynamics discussed above show that this association does not always hold. Welfare systems play a major role in shaping such hyper-flexibility, by creating pressure to find any work at all as quickly as possible, which is particularly intense for some migrants due to differential entitlements to welfare, such as those discussed above. While there was evidence that some individuals managed to improve their position over time, new arrivals continue to face these pressures.

Frequent movement from one job to another, sequentially, was a routine part of work for some respondents, sometimes due to temporary contracts or agency employment. Henryk, a Polish man in his early 40s who moved to Britain in 2007, gave a typical account:

'When I arrived, I went to [a] factory because I had a job through the agency...I was cleaning toilets...I was supposed to work about 2-3 months and then I [was promised I would] be placed in a different sector [welding]. I'd been waiting 10 months and then I asked [the] agency...shouldn't they change my sector [role]... the next day I was told that they don't need me anymore. They got rid of me, they booted me out... then over the internet I have found this cleaning firm, where I was working not so long because crisis... [Since then] I was working sometimes in [a] printing house, sometimes in recycling and I'm looking for something stable but for now I can't find any[thing] stable.'

A sequence of low-paid and insecure jobs was thus produced through a combination of agency work, limited sectorial options within the region and worsening economic conditions following the economic crisis. Within this precarious context, an attempt to assert agency over the nature of their work (to move from cleaning to welding) led to forced movement out of the job.

Sequential movement between jobs was often connected to experiences of discrimination in migrants' accounts. While some respondents spoke about positive relations at work, others described experiences of discrimination from employers, co-workers and members of the public encountered at work. This is illustrated by Natalia, who arrived from Zimbabwe in 2002, claimed asylum and then secured British citizenship:

'I am opting to leave [my job] next week, because to me, I feel the place has got a lot of racism...we even complain to the manager...you are working with two people, you are the third one, and they will be talking, talking, and once you get there, they go into silence... Or the work...they don't want to do, they will always throw it at you, "Can you do that?", "Can you do that?", "Can you do that?"... When they know it's you who is coming for a night shift, they will just leave things scattered.'

The most common response to discrimination reported by respondents was to leave the job and seek an alternative, a form of job mobility under duress. This had a regional dimension: while some respondents described the North-East England as exceptionally welcoming, others saw it as particularly discriminatory, and linked this to lower levels of ethnic diversity compared to some other parts of Britain (e.g. Clayton 2012). In some cases, the response was to leave the region for another part of Britain that was seen as more multicultural, representing geographical mobility under duress.

Job mobility also took cyclical forms and was sometimes combined with considerable geographical mobility within the region. In a pronounced example of this, in an area encompassing the northern part of the region and extending into Scotland there was evidence of a particular configuration of temporary, low-paid employment across multiple sectors, summarised in the following account by an experienced worker with a voluntary sector organisation:

'many migrants have remained here for many, many years, on these precarious contracts... Come December... they are laid off [from Food Processing Site 1]...and some of them may go to [Food Processing Site 2] for a bit... Come the holiday season, many people in the winter vegetable processing firms go to [caravan parks] to clean the caravans ...so they work all the time with various jobs.'

Migrants with experience working in these sectors verified this account. Over the years some of these workers moved on to permanent contracts in food processing but the majority either remained in this situation of precarious cyclical mobility or moved away.

Some participants reported working multiple jobs at the same time, representing job mobility over a shorter temporal scale that often also involved significant geographical mobility within the region. This contributes to what Jirón and Imilan (2015) call ‘flexible time-space’, in which workers manage their mobility between multiple work sites to meet the demands of employers. Prudence, a refugee from Zimbabwe arriving in Britain in 2001, described such experiences as widespread:

‘I remember when we [were] first granted refugee status...you would work as a care worker during the day and do some cleaning as well and only be home briefly to have a sleep and pick up my daughter from school.’

Many respondents viewed this negatively, particularly where travel times and costs combined with caring responsibilities and a lack of informal support networks, suggesting this was not a ‘free’ choice but reflects limited mobility power. In some cases, hyper-flexibility was maintained but at the cost of impaired family relationships, revealing a tension between some forms of non-economic attachments discussed as part of the rooted worker dynamic and the demands of hyper-flexibility. For example, Gabi, a man in his 50s from Hungary, described working long hours and split shifts in the care sector across a wide geographical area, which sometimes led to sleeping in his car between shifts and disrupted family relationships:

‘It’s too much, because I’m a family man. My son is that age when I would like to spend as much time as possible with him. But there are weeks when from Friday evening until Tuesday afternoon, I don’t see him... One day my wife phoned me and said, your son asked if you’re coming home. She said, “He was home every day, but he came after you went to bed, and left before you get up”. There are weeks when I was working 70, 76 hours was the maximum lately. And that is too much.’

Such work patterns also have clear implications for the balance of domestic labour within the family. In other cases, such conditions made paid work impossible, showing how the hyper-flexible worker dynamic can rapidly slip into the surplus worker dynamic.

The hyper-flexible worker is thus required to move constantly between places and jobs, with limited mobility power, in both geographical and employment senses. Lack of control about the location, timing and nature of work contributes to a state of subjection, limits the ability to direct one’s mobility to escape conditions of exploitation, and consequently leaves workers with little power within the labour process.

## **Conclusion**

Casas-Cortés (2014) proposes that precarity can be usefully understood as a shared condition, which offers a basis for collective organising. Yet realising that potential faces inherent challenges arising from the multiplicity of forms that precarity can take, and the variety of causal factors. These findings suggest that focusing on mobility power in terms of geography, job mobility and labour process, can help to navigate this multiplicity, providing both a common denominator that links different forms of precarity, and a lens to make sense of their differences. Examining the production of precarity through particular arrangements of mobility/immobility can help to identify strategic demands that are appropriate to varying precarious conditions. Such a multiplicity of approaches could both reduce conditions for specific dynamics of precarity and strengthen the basis for united action in pursuit of wider changes.

The typology of dynamics of precarity presented here shows that struggles around mobility form a common thread. More specifically, it suggests that amidst the multiplicity of forms of definitions in which precarity appears the control over one's mobility is critical. This in turn directs attention toward the ways mobility power is undermined, whether through the dispersal system for housing asylum seekers and the prohibition on their waged labour, or the restrictions on state welfare for EU migrants that propel them into work, or the social attachments and costs to geographical mobility that cut across migrant categories. This can help develop specific strategic demands and strategies to build mobility power, although the challenges facing precarious migrants organising cannot be overstated. Vice versa, directing discussion of mobilities toward the issue of precarity broadens our understanding of the ways in which mobility and mobility power are unevenly experienced within contemporary capitalism.

Beyond the migrant categories discussed here, and other visa categories with their associated restrictions, this analysis points toward the importance of mobility power for wider society. It suggests that struggles over mobility and struggles against labour exploitation are necessarily connected. This is particularly relevant in a historical and national context where the idea of the 'responsible citizen' has often been based around individual mobility in response to the labour market (Jordan and Brown 2007, 256). It also carries significance internationally, by calling attention to the fact that contrary to those who argue mobility is freedom (e.g. Jones

2016), mobility may be experienced as oppressive (Gill, Caletrío, and Mason 2011), and may perpetuate exploitation. The question is not whether mobility occurs, but on whose terms and in whose interests.

The data presented in this article shows multiple ways in which workers give some degree of consent to precarious and exploitative conditions. Workers may have other priorities that lead them to accept exploitative conditions, or they may prioritise their individual interests above challenging exploitation collectively. As Rogaly (2009, 1984) points out, ‘incremental and sometimes highly significant changes in microspaces of work and living’ may occur in such a way that the domination of capital and the exploitation of labour remain unchallenged or increase, even as the situation of some individuals improves. The tendency to prioritising ‘getting by’ or ‘getting ahead’ on an individual basis may be increased where precarious conditions make organising difficult (Berntsen 2016). While mobility power creates possibilities for resistance to labour exploitation, whether those possibilities are realised is thus influenced by consciousness and collective organisation.

Commonalities might be identified between the interests of precarious migrants and other sections of workers who also lack mobility power, as manifested for example in disempowering experiences of moving cyclically between jobs and welfare statuses (Greer 2016), and patterns of geographical mobility in housing that some have described as ‘social cleansing’, whereby a combination of rising rents, reduced access to state benefits, and the destruction of social housing, forces working-class people out of particular localities, cities and regions (Paton and Cooper 2016). Such movements can be understood as forms of displacement, with growing commonalities to the dispersal system for asylum seekers. The growth of precarity can therefore be understood as fundamentally a reduction of various forms of mobility power, with control over one’s geographical mobility, job mobility and mobility in the labour process all featuring prominently. Furthermore, such widespread attacks on workers’ mobility power suggest deep-seated causes and a need for collective responses and alliances. The analysis presented here offers one way to identify points of connection between different sections of workers as a basis for solidarity, despite the severe underdevelopment of such alliances in England today.



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## Appendices

Table A.1: Comparison of Polish migrants, Refugees and General Adult Population

	Refugees 2005-2009	Polish Migrants 2014-15	General Population 2014-15
Currently Employed/Self-employed	44.8% (n=544)	81.1% (n=2,271)	70.0% (n=134,479)
Looked for paid work in previous 4 weeks	-	26.0% (n=137)	18.4% (n=10,100)
Work self-defined as temporary	37.1% (n=193)	6.3% (n=1,881)	5.9% (n=108,922)
Mean actual hrs worked/week incl. overtime	-	41.47	39.57
Median hourly wages	-	£7.94 (n=1,496)	£10.87 (n=89,459)
<i>Sectors</i>			
Agriculture & fishing	-	1.5% (n=34)	1.6% (n=2,136)
Energy & water	-	0.9% (n=21)	1.5% (n=1,990)
Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	0.6% (n=3)	-	-
Manufacturing	18.8% (n=87)	26.6% (n=603)	10.8% (n=14,557)
Construction	5.4% (n=25)	7.2% (n=163)	6.8% (n=9,156)
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	13.8% (n=64)	-	-
Accommodation & food service activities/Distribution, hotels & restaurants	14.7% (n=68)	25.6% (n=580)	18.5% (n=24,920)
Transportation & storage + Information & communication/Transport & communication	4.9% (n=23)	9.5% (n=215)	6.2% (n=8,305)
Financial & insurance activities/Banking, finance & insurance etc	1.5% (n=7)	11.8% (n=268)	16.8% (n=22,593)
Professional, scientific, & technical activities	1.9% (n=9)	-	-
Administrative & support service activities	7.1% (n=33)	-	-
Public administration & defence; compulsory social security + Education + Human health & social work activities/Public admin, educ & health	27.6% (n=128)	12.7% (n=287)	31.6% (n=42,492)
Other services	1.7% (n=8)	4.1% (n=93)	6.3% (n=8,444)
<i>Occupation Group</i>			
Managers, Directors And Senior Officials	3.7% (n=17)	3.4% (n=76)	10.0% (n=13,457)
Professional Occupations	3.9% (n=18)	5.6% (n=126)	19.4% (n=26,198)
Associate Professional And Technical Occupations	5.6% (n=26)	4.3% (n=98)	13.6% (n=18,314)
Administrative And Secretarial Occupations	3.0% (n=14)	6.0% (n=135)	11.0% (n=14,840)
Skilled Trades Occupations	11.0% (n=51)	15.7% (n=355)	10.7% (n=14,424)
Personal Service Occupations/Caring, Leisure And Other Service Occupations	17.8% (n=83)	8.4% (n=190)	9.9% (n=13,286)
Sales And Customer Service Occupations	10.8% (n=50)	4.2% (n=95)	7.9% (n=10,633)
Process, Plant And Machine Operatives	11.0% (n=51)	21.2% (n=481)	6.6% (n=8,910)
Elementary Occupations	33.3% (n=155)	31.4% (n=712)	10.9% (n=14,672)

Data compiled from the ONS Annual Population Survey and the Survey of New Refugees

Table A2: Survey sample

<i>Sub-region</i>	
Tyneside and Northumberland (NE postcodes)	31% (n=126)
Sunderland and Durham (SR and DH postcodes)	24% (n=98)
Teesside and Darlington (TS and DL postcodes)	35% (n=139)
Unknown (no postcode provided)	10% (n=39)
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	51% (n=194)
Female	49% (n=184)
<i>Age</i>	
Under 16	1% (n=3)
16-24	14% (n=55)
25-34	36% (n=143)
35-44	33% (n=128)
45-54	14% (n=55)
55-64	3% (n=10)
<i>Immigration Status</i>	
EU10 migrants	28% (n=112)
Refugees with leave to remain <sup>4</sup>	24% (n=98)
Asylum seekers <sup>5</sup>	22% (n=88)
Other status/ unknown <sup>6</sup>	26% (n=104)

Table A.3: Migrant qualitative interviews sample

<i>Sub-region</i>	
Tyneside and Northumberland	37% (n=15)
Sunderland and Durham	40% (n=16)
Teesside and Darlington	18% (n=7)
Unknown	5% (n=2)
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	38% (n=15)
Female	62% (n=25)
<i>Age</i>	
Under 16	0% (n=0)
16-24	5% (n=2)
25-34	20% (n=8)
35-44	33% (n=13)
45-54	10% (n=4)
55-64	3% (n=1)
Unknown	30% (n=12)
<i>Immigration Status</i>	
EU10 migrants	35% (n=14)
Refugees with leave to remain <sup>7</sup>	43% (n=17)
Asylum seekers <sup>8</sup>	20% (n=8)
Other status <sup>9</sup>	3% (n=1)



## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> EU10 comprises Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Romania.

<sup>2</sup> As defined by policy, ‘refugees’ have been granted leave to remain on the basis of well-founded fears of violence or persecution in their country of origin. Asylum seekers have applied for leave to remain as refugees, but have not yet had this claim accepted by the state.

<sup>3</sup> Standing (2011) defines Fordism as a set of labour relations in which workers could reasonably expect to maintain full-time employment with the same employer for a large portion of their lives, with job security backed by powerful trade unions.

<sup>4</sup> Includes British citizens who previously claimed asylum.

<sup>5</sup> Includes refused asylum seekers.

<sup>6</sup> Includes EU15 migrants, spouse visas, work permits.

<sup>7</sup> Includes British citizens who previously claimed asylum.

<sup>8</sup> Includes refused asylum seekers.

<sup>9</sup> A non-EU spouse of an EU migrant.