

‘Getting a grip’? Phenomenological insights into handling work place in London’s Soho

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Abstract

How are working lives shaped by the demands and expectations associated with a particular workplace? And how are work identities enacted to demonstrate a capacity to cope with place-based demands, expectations and associations? Drawing on insights from phenomenological perspectives on space, place and situated experience, particularly Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘grip’, and interview data drawn from longitudinal research with men and women working in London’s Soho, this article shows how working lives and identities are situated within, and enacted through, practices that involve developing and demonstrating a capacity for *place handling*. The analysis shows how this is negotiated by those working in iconic locales in which their working lives and identities are shaped by meanings that are both evolving and enduring, and that require them to get and maintain a demonstrable grip on the setting in which they work. In contributing to a growing interest in understanding working lives as situated phenomena, the article challenges the idea that work is increasingly place-less, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the digitalization of work accelerated by it, emphasizing how where work takes place continues to matter to how it is enacted and experienced.

Keywords

embodiment, financial services, London, Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology, place, place handling, sex industry, Soho

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Introduction

This article draws on phenomenological approaches to space and place, connecting these to an analysis of situated experiences of work based on insights from Merleau-Ponty's (2002 [1945]) post-dualist ontology, and specifically his concept of handling. The latter refers to the ability to demonstrate an embodied capacity to connect perceptions of the social spaces and settings in which we are situated to our occupation of those spaces and settings, and to our movements within them, and to be able to cope with these lived experiences. Understood in this way, 'handling' involves asserting our subjectivity through showing what we are capable of in, and in response to, our situated, social circumstances, sometimes in ways that demonstrate 'mastery' of the circumstances and setting (Salamon, 2012), and sometimes more tentatively and ambiguously so.¹ We show how, for those who work in a distinctive setting such as London's Soho, developing and demonstrating an ability to 'handle' the place becomes a significant and meaningful identity marker, one that involves the deployment of what Merleau-Ponty calls *optimal grip*. The latter refers to the ideal distance between oneself and an object of perception (such as a painting, landscape or a screen/monitor, for instance).² To be too far away means losing the depth of perception and detail that comes from proximity; being too close risks losing focus and an overall sense of the 'big picture' and context, blurring the frame of perception by being, at least perceptually so, overly immersed in it (i.e. so close that we can no longer 'see' the object for what it is). We show how the same, or similar, can be said about working in a particular place, namely that it requires not only the 'optimal' degree of proximity/distance, but also that this involves the embodied capacity to cope with the specific demands of that place. This is explored here through Merleau-Ponty's concept of the *intentional arc*, which refers to the way in which the intimate connection between one's own and others' bodies and 'things' becomes animated through the deployment of bodily skills that are acquired and stored, not simply as cognitive resources but as bodily dispositions.

The notion of *maximal or optimal grip* helps us to understand the body's capacity to maintain this intentional arc as the basis of social interaction, refining its responses in accordance with the particular associations and expectations of the sense of 'rightness' we experience in any given situation (Murphy, 2022). This *familiar manner of handling the world* (Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1945]: 370) is important not only in emphasizing how the social world is composed of selves, others and things that 'gear into' each other; it is also helpful, we argue here, to understanding how working lives and identities are socially situated within the context of specific place-based associations and expectations that both evolve and endure over time.³ For Merleau-Ponty, *prise* or 'grip' refers not simply to 'grasp', or to hold, but also to the *capacity* to grasp and to hold, and it is the development and demonstration of this socially situated, embodied capacity as a basis of sociality that is of particular interest to us here. Bringing together these ideas and insights enables us to understand how having to handle place is important to 'grasping', experientially and analytically,⁴ how working lives are perceived and experienced in iconic settings like London's Soho.

Described by some as 'the most tempting and exciting part of London' (Hutton, 2012: 7), Soho is a relatively compact geographical space, with a distinctive local

geography and character; yet in terms of its wider cultural associations and economic significance it is also a highly global setting. Despite recent concerns about corporate over-development and sanitization (Sanders-McDonagh et al., 2016), Soho retains an 'edge' to it that reflects its history, culture, politics and location, and perhaps most notably, its industry (Speiser, 2017). A comparatively transient place embedded within a history of migration and cultural diversity, Soho's economy is characterized by sectors of work that are relatively unstable and precarious. At the same time, it is within close proximity to London's main shopping thoroughfares, Oxford Street and Regent Street, and to the more upmarket area, Mayfair. The latter is a key location for private equity and investment banking firms, both of which feed off Soho's long-standing association with enjoyment and entertainment, exploitation and excess (Glinert, 2007). The area's renowned pleasure economies in food, theatre, fashion, music and commercial sex intersect with its built environment, material culture and distinctive geography. Added to this, Soho's history of migration, its propensity for reinvention, eclecticism, political and religious diversity, and the area's distinct location and urban geography combine to enable the area to 'take place' in a very particular way. As we argue below, this 'taking place' both shapes the work experiences and identities of those who work there, and 'works' (moulds, crafts) Soho into being the place that it is. This process of bringing Soho into being takes place through the associations and expectations attached to it in a way that reflects Merleau-Ponty's (2002 [1945]: 241) post-dualist ontology of becoming as a process of 'perceptual synthesis' through which the material (objective) and meaningful (subjective) are intertwined.

In the situated experiences of working in Soho that we consider, getting and maintaining a grip, and handling the place itself, are vital to developing and demonstrating a capacity to cope with the nature of corporeal engagement that working in a place like Soho entails. Working lives, we argue, are the outcome of a dynamic relationship between perceptions, and the expectations, associations, actions and experiences that are mutually constitutive of what we do, and of where we do it. In our discussion we show how the work undertaken by two different groups of Soho-based workers employed in a hedge fund and in licensed sex shops is 'put into place'. We do so through an analysis that foregrounds how working lives are shaped by Soho as a work setting, and which in turn shape the place itself as a working community. In developing this analysis, we focus on these two groups' respective experiences of *place handling*; that is, of their need to develop and demonstrate a capacity to get and maintain a grip on the place in which they work.⁵ We contribute not only to the substantive literature on work, space and place, but also to the application of phenomenological thought, and insights from Merleau-Ponty's writing in particular, to the analysis of working life more broadly. Challenging the idea that 'working life' is increasingly place-less, particularly in the context of rapid digitalization in the wake of COVID-19, we develop parallel lines of argument that have emphasized, instead, how work identities continue to be situated in ways that are both material and meaningful (Nash, 2022). We show how this is particularly significant in the case of work places such as Soho that are characterized by relatively transient flows of capital and people, yet which are also particularly distinctive and discernible settings that, as our analysis highlights, require those who work there to get and maintain 'a grip'.

With this in mind, we consider the following two related research questions: how are working lives shaped by the demands and expectations associated with a particular workplace? And how are work identities enacted to demonstrate a capacity to cope with place-based demands, expectations and associations? In response, we consider how work and place are mutually enacted and experienced through the capacity to ‘handle’ a particular setting. Through addressing these questions, adopting the approach outlined above, we contribute to research that highlights the empirical significance of place to understanding working lives and identities (Bosley et al., 2009; Dany et al., 2011; Ituma and Simpson, 2009; Mitra, 2015; Nash, 2022; Saxenian, 2001; Valette and Culié, 2015). Emphasizing that it is not just our occupational identities that are ‘socially, temporally and spatially situated’ (Fine, 1996: 90) but our working lives more broadly, we show how the specifics of a particular locale shape, and are shaped by, work, and by the dynamic relationship between self, others and things. Recognizing the importance of distinct locales as central to the ‘experiences of existence’ (Fotaki et al., 2017: 7), we emphasize how work identities are situated at the intersections of particular and often localized geographies, histories, materialities, economies, politics and cultures. In emphasizing this, we contribute to a growing interest in insights from phenomenology, particularly Merleau-Ponty’s (2002 [1945]) writing, in work and organization studies (Dale and Latham, 2015; Hancock et al., 2015; Küpers, 2015; Riach and Warren, 2015). We do so by developing a conceptual and theoretical lens through which to understand how work and places are mutually enacted for two groups of workers who, because of *where* they work, constitute ‘geographical outsiders’, situated at the margins of their respective economies (retail) and sectors (financial services) in a setting that is both stigmatized, yet which also accords possibilities for ‘doing things differently’, as one of our participants put it. Demonstrating and developing an ability to ‘handle’ this is central to understanding how their respective working lives and identities are situated – enacted and understood – in their work place.

The article begins by summarizing insights from the sociology of work and organization, and cultural geography on understanding how working lives are shaped by place. It then elaborates on the ideas that we draw on from phenomenological thought, particularly Merleau-Ponty’s writing on the grip, summarizing its influence to date within the field of organization studies. We draw on these literatures in order to frame our approach to understanding the situated nature of work, space and place, and a capacity for ‘handling’ specific work places, respectively. We then provide a detailed account of our methodological approach, including the process through which we collated and analysed our longitudinal data, before considering the centrality of place handling to the work experiences and identities of the people we studied. In our discussion, we show how where they work connects these workers’ lives to how they are perceived, enacted and situated phenomenologically. The final part of the article, informed by phenomenological thinking, particularly Merleau-Ponty’s writing, develops our theoretical argument, and is illustrated with reference to our empirical data. We emphasize that working lives are situated enactments of a demonstrable capacity for ‘handling’, that is, for getting and maintaining a grip. We end by highlighting how the work experiences we consider are situated within the particularities of Soho as a work place, considering the relevance of this for the analysis of contemporary working lives more widely, emphasizing scope for ‘placing work’ in other settings and sectors.

‘Placing’ working lives: Situating work in space, place and setting

When thinking of working life as a process enacted within, and with reference to, particular social contexts and settings, Bosley et al. (2009: 1487, emphasis added) called for an approach that ‘starts with actors’ *situated* understandings’. Subsequently, a growing number of studies have emphasized the importance of context to understanding working lives as situated, enacted experiences. For example, Mitra’s (2015: 1813) study of Native Alaskans’ subsistence work examines their ‘everyday communicative practices, amidst the structural conditions that frame their lived experiences’. In their study of academic careers in French universities, Dany et al. (2011) consider the significance of understanding how narratives of workplace progression, specifically those relating to promotion, are made sense of within the milieu of particular social, cultural and institutional contexts. Similarly, Ituma and Simpson (2009) demonstrate the importance of national context in their study of information and communications technology (ICT) workers in Nigeria, highlighting the persistence of power relations and perceptual boundaries shaped by gender, class and culture, while Heiland’s (2022: 1842, emphasis added) study of food courier work in seven German cities shows how platform labour as a mode of ‘control regime *is also place-based*’. Elsewhere, Valette and Culié (2015) describe how the working lives of ‘organizational nomads’ in Minalogic (a French ICT innovation cluster) are dependent upon social positions enabled or realized through a clustered, geographically specific, local labour market. Their study echoes Saxenian’s (2001: 23) earlier research on working lives in Silicon Valley that shows how, as a region characterized by an open labour market that promotes learning and creativity, Silicon Valley transcends organizational or occupational boundaries in a way that means professionals tend to identify themselves as working for ‘Silicon Valley, Inc’ rather than for a specific employer or in a distinctive occupation. Taken together, such work speaks to broader concerns that show how working lives are not perceived, experienced or enacted in a vacuum; rather, they are socially situated, multi-layered and complex, foregrounding the importance of situating, or ‘placing’ working lives not in the abstract but in the specifics of the distinctive locales in which they are enacted.

The focus of research to date, however, has tended to be on how places shape work, rather than on the dynamics of how these two phenomena are mutually enacted. The latter issue is important to consider when thinking about working lives and identities in contexts and places that are particularly complex, fluid and multi-dimensional. While for many, work is increasingly place-less, it is also the case that associations with distinct sectors of work can become sedimented or ‘built into’ particular places over time, so that they become woven into the social materiality of the location. The financial district of the City of London is perhaps an obvious example (Nash, 2018, 2022), as is Wall Street (Fisher, 2012). It is important, therefore, to consider how the pull of these two characteristics – complexity, fluidity and multi-dimensionality – on the one hand, and the enduring (perhaps intensifying) sedimentation of particular work places and their meaningful associations on the other, are central to understanding how contemporary working lives are experienced and enacted. In particular, we need to consider how, within this wider context, work is experienced by people whose working lives are shaped by, and shape, a particular geographical setting, intertwining with its historical and cultural associations,

and material forms. Further, this issue highlights the importance of understanding how working lives involve ‘taking place’; that is, are simultaneously located within and associated with distinctive locales, at the same time as effectively staking an identity claim on those settings in ways that both occur and unfold in place, at the same time as drawing from, extracting or anchoring themselves in particular locales (‘taking’ from/in place).

Forming an attachment to a specific setting or locale can be meaningful and materially significant, as can conforming to the normative expectations and associations of particular work place settings in order to forge and sustain working lives and identities there. McDowell (2010; McDowell and Court, 1994) emphasized this in their study of the City of London, highlighting how occupational recognition relied on embodying particular cultural characteristics and behavioural traits that reflected the City, as both a sector of work (a finance market) as well as a distinctive work place and setting (the City). As Waring and Waring (2009: 361) have put it more recently, ‘in the global financial centres of London . . . the values of competition, motivation, success and profitability permeate the workplace and have an impact on how workers are expected to perform and act’. Further, in their study of independent workers, Petriglieri et al. (2019: 154) show how libraries, cafes or home offices serve as ‘holding environments’ that enable otherwise transient city-based workers to form attachments to particular work places. Their participants cultivated connections to the ‘holding’ work environments they describe, that were ‘often invested with an almost sacred reverence as locations conducive to concentration and hospitable to inspiration’. Somewhat counter-intuitively perhaps, Petriglieri et al. (2019: 154) suggest that the increasingly precarious and contingent nature of work *intensifies* rather than diminishes a need for attachment to a particular work place or setting.⁶ Arguably then, as work becomes increasingly digitally remote and mediated, attachments to distinctive places and locales, at least for some, might become even more significant.

In our discussion below, we consider how these dynamics play out in two different occupational groups, connected by where they work, considering the significance of location to their working lives and identities. By ‘placing work’ in this way, we aim to highlight how particular values and normative ideals shape the perceptions, experiences and identities as well as the material settings and relations that constitute working lives. Furthermore, we develop the work cited above that foregrounds how contexts condition these possibilities, in terms of compelling or constraining the ways we enact our working lives and identities – be they particular local labour markets, professions or sectors, or workplaces, by showing how work is not just located in ‘place’ in an abstract/conceptual sense but is corporeally experienced and enacted with reference to the particularities of specific places, shaped by distinct geographical, temporal and cultural landscapes. To provide a lens through which to develop this, we turn to phenomenological insights from Merleau-Ponty’s writing as a way of making sense of how working lives are ‘placed’, that is, situated within the specific material, social and cultural contexts that simultaneously constitute work and place.

‘Placing work’ phenomenologically

It is now some time since Herod et al. (2007: 255) observed that ‘efforts to theorize place in a more sophisticated manner are crucial for understanding [work and employment]

practices'. Since then, interest in space and place in the field of work and organization studies has evolved into a thematic preoccupation with how the social, cultural and material aspects of organizational life intertwine (Chugh and Hancock, 2009; Dale, 2005; Dale and Latham, 2015; Nash, 2022).

Compared with the more open-ended concept of space, 'place' is generally thought, within phenomenological geography especially, to refer to the particular, rather than the abstract (Massey, 1997), with place being understood largely as a 'pause' in the flow of space (Tuan, 1977). This suggests that place is fundamental to understanding how specific working lives shape and are shaped by where they are situated, and how they come to be enacted, experienced and understood. Yet both space and place are central to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of our embodied engagement with the world, and for this reason it is helpful to revisit how the two concepts or 'spheres' of space and place relate phenomenologically, rather than to privilege the specifics of the latter in favour of the more 'abstract' former term. For Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 117), space is the axis of embodied experience: 'far from my body's being for me no more than a fragment of space, there would be no space at all for me if I had no body'. For him, the body is 'essentially an expressive space . . . not merely one expressive space among the rest . . . It is the origin of the rest, expressive movement itself' (2002 [1945]: 169). For him, the body is situated as the locus of spatial experience and vice versa. In understanding how this is enacted *as, and through work*, and within the context of a specific setting, we need to move, we would suggest, towards a clearer articulation of how space and place interrelate in ways that do not privilege the one over the other, in order to appreciate how the dynamics of specific work places are phenomenologically significant.

With this in mind, it is important to note that while much of the organizational literature on embodied experiences of space and place has drawn from Lefebvre's (1991) trialectical account of the social production of space, ideas derived from phenomenology, notably Merleau-Ponty's writing, have also been increasingly influential. This is particularly the case with regard to his engagement with the way in which the embodied self is situated within the coming together of time, space and place (e.g. Dale and Latham, 2015; Küpers, 2015), and in the nexus of self, others and things (Hales et al., 2021; Murphy, 2022). Such scholarship draws largely on Merleau-Ponty's post-dualist, situated understanding of the lived experience of living in and through the body, developed most fully in his book, *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002 [1945]). However, this work has yet to be explored as a reference point for research on perceptions and lived experiences of work as a spatially situated phenomenon, one that – in particular places – involves getting and maintaining a grip on the expectations and associations involved in bringing those places into being. Such an approach could proceed from an understanding of identity, informed by insights from Merleau-Ponty's writing, as 'an embodied emplacement that is constituted by socio-material entanglements and performative enactments' (Murphy, 2022: 21). We draw from the work referred to above in seeking to develop this kind of approach by showing how these 'embodied emplacements' are constituted, entangled and enacted within the specific contexts of a particular time and place. This emphasizes how within the particularities of setting, an embodied display of competence or 'maximal grip' on one's self, others and things (an ability to 'handle' the place, and work involved) is performative of working lives and identities,

enabling these and the place itself to ‘come into being’ as Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 470) might put it.

Underpinning this post-dualist, processual ontology of embodiment is an understanding of the body as the ‘mediator’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1945]: 146) between the self, others and the social world, including the ‘things’ through which it is composed. For Merleau-Ponty, the dynamic elements of selves, others and things that make up the social world gear into each other, intertwining meanings and materialities, in order to afford the sense of prise or ‘grip’ referred to above. As Murphy (2022) suggests in his application of these ideas to an analysis of masculinities and the work undertaken by motorcycle repairers, Merleau-Ponty highlights a significant normative dimension to this aspect of his ontology of embodied subjectivity, one that Murphy (2022: 26) locates primarily in Merleau-Ponty’s preoccupation with the ‘felt sense of bodily equilibrium that occurs when correct postures and positioning enable us to achieve a maximal grip on the world’. Central to this ‘achievement’ is the ability for the self-others-things nexus to mobilize in purposeful, sense-making activities through which bodily skills can be acquired and deployed; what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the ‘intentional arc’. It is this ‘unitary ability’ (Reuter, 1999: 74), that is, the demonstrable capacity to bring together self, others and things to achieve a maximal, or optimal grip, that generates bodily dispositions through which we demonstrate our ability to ‘handle’ the circumstances in which we find ourselves, including at work. This ability also enables us to navigate our relationship to our own and others’ embodied perceptions of the world, and the material things that constitute that world, including the setting in which ours and other subjectivities are lived and ‘worked’. Rather than understanding Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the grip as the articulation of an ‘intentional arc’ imbued with agentic surety and the capacity for mastery, however, we follow more cautious, nuanced readings of the grip as functioning, instead, as a compensatory strategy, intended to ‘stave off uncertainty, lack of mastery, and ambiguity’ (Salamon, 2012: 244).

Crucial to understanding the tentative, compensatory nature of the intentional arc, and the precarity of getting and keeping ‘a grip’, is Merleau-Ponty’s (2002 [1945]) ontology of the situated self as based on a simultaneously active perceiving subject and a perceived object. Here, engagement is not simply the way we make ourselves, but is the only way in which we are situated within the social world, and in turn, in *doing and being so*, constitute that world (Hancock et al., 2015). In this world-making endeavour, the body and its dispositions perpetually become ‘a system of possible actions, a virtual body whose phenomenal “place” is defined by its task and by its situation’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1945]: 260). In other words, to inhabit the world and its associated meanings and forms of order means to be constituted in and through that world as the perceiving subject and perceived object in any given situation. Setting is therefore never simply a passive landscape or background; nor is it only a place in the abstract sense, just as our embodied selves are never simply ‘a thing in objective space’ and time. Rather, setting is the specific, active site on and through which we are compelled to make meaning in order to make sense of the world as we are situated in it, and into which we tentatively, and normatively, project ourselves in our efforts to ‘stave off uncertainty’, as Salamon (2012) puts it, and give the impression that we can ‘handle’ our circumstances, including not just who but also where we are. Overall, this means we are compelled to ‘handle’ the social world as we grasp its

meanings at the same time as being situated in the world we inhabit subjectively as social beings who encounter that world through the materiality of our, and others' bodies and the 'things' around us.

An important question therefore becomes: what role does *where* and *how* we work play in shaping our lived experiences as simultaneously material and meaning-making beings, that is, as both objects and subjects of work? In response to this question, Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 260) might emphasize that our working lives and identities come into being as they 'take up a place' in specific circumstances, and at particular points in time as we learn and demonstrate our embodied capacity to 'handle' that placing. Hence, we enact our working lives in particular settings through developing, and demonstrating, our capacity to 'grasp' them, that is, to make sense of what they mean for and to us. This way of understanding how lived experiences of work relates to place handling helps us, as we show below, to think in a more theoretically informed and nuanced way about how work lives and identities take place, that is, are practised in situ.

A phenomenological perspective on work as it is experienced through techniques such as handling is therefore particularly valuable in helping to understand the significance of the specifics of place to and for work. It helps us to apprehend that what is perceived as possible, legitimate and appropriate might be shaped by factors beyond immediate professional or sectoral demands that relate to *where* work is enacted, and (as we also discuss), by whom. If, as Barley et al. (2017: 114) suggest, working lives 'are constructed at the boundary between the individual and the social world in which the individual participates', a post-dualist ontology such as that outlined above provides a valuable theoretical lens that enables us to see how the specifics of subjectivity and setting come together in ways that compel and constrain particular, situated work identities. Through such an approach, the latter are 'placed' in the context of socially situated practices that connect, or 'intertwine' *who and what* we are with *where* we are. This highlights how places 'trigger and carry sensuous perceptions and embodied memories that influence our ways of being' (Ropo and Höykinpuro, 2017: 359), including our ways of being in and through where we work. To show how these dynamics play out, we now turn to focus on a very specific location to which particular expectations are attached, namely London's Soho, showing how the place's evolving and enduring associations (Speiser, 2017) shape what it means to work there. We emphasize how markets in commercial sex, and in professional service economies such as finance, have formed discernible clusters whose meanings merge and mutate in concert with Soho's distinctive history, geography and culture to situate or 'place' the lived experiences, identities and perceptions of those who work there.

Studying Soho as a work place: Data collection and analysis

Soho's history and economy does not lend itself to traditional ways of thinking about working life as a progressively linear or clearly defined phenomenon. Its geography, culture and industry are more fluid and multi-dimensional than surrounding areas of central London, which are dominated by more corporate commercial, political and financial organizations. There is a well-established association with the creative industries in Soho, notably post-production film and music; the expansion of businesses specializing

in digital media, communication technologies and financial services has added to these aspects of the area as a working community since the 1990s. However, the area and its economy continue to be shaped largely by small-scale, local businesses, and by clustered markets including those in hospitality and commercial sex. With regard to the latter, while urban branding, local community initiatives and the introduction and enforcement of licensing regulations since the 1980s have combined to ‘clean up’ Soho, the continuing presence of commercial sex and an enduring association with sleaze makes it unique as a place to live, work and consume, one in which the boundaries between ‘work’ and ‘non-work’ are fluid, and in which people’s day to day working lives often move between paid labour and consumption. And as we show below, although Soho is a continually evolving locale, the area’s historically established associations and enduring uniqueness continue to shape perceptions of what it means to work there.

In considering what we can learn about navigating ‘grip’ from studying the working lives of those based in a setting like Soho, we take inspiration from the continued relevance of Weick’s (1974: 487) classic argument that organizational scholars should try to focus as much as possible on ‘everyday events, places, and questions, micro-organizations, and absurd organizations’ on the premise that ‘in these sites, organizationally relevant phenomena are more visible . . . than in complex organizations’. Focusing on the everyday and often also the absurd in this way, we brought together two qualitative longitudinal studies of ostensibly different forms of work. While we focus exclusively on interview excerpts here, both studies drew on the rich sociologically informed ethnographic tradition already well established in work and organization studies that advocates an immersive study of work as it is ‘constructed and construed by particular people, *in particular places*, at particular times, doing particular things’ (Van Maanen, 2015: 47, emphasis added).

Our approach to both studies, and to our analysis here, draws on Merleau-Ponty’s (2002 [1945]: xv and xi) writing on the phenomenological method, specifically his point that ‘in order to see the world and grasp it as paradoxical, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it’. Such an approach is premised on an ontology of the social as ‘a closely woven fabric’, one that is both manufactured (fabricated) and closely woven (dense but flowing). At the same time, to understand that reality we need to ‘unpick’ its many layers, an approach that leads to a phenomenological hermeneutics involving working, critically and reflexively, through the many layers of reality that constitute the phenomena, and lived experiences, under consideration. Our methodological approach was influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s (2002 [1945]: vii) view that understanding is achieved through an account of ‘space, time and the world as we “live” them’. The main methodological challenge that this raises for us is to reflect the lived experiences through which other people and things come to have meaning for our research participants, or as Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 84, emphasis added) puts it, to understand ‘the system “self-others-things” *as it comes into being*’. His post-dualist ontology of the embodied subject as situated within social relations and contexts that compel us to make sense of the world we inhabit and that, in doing so, bring them into being, involves us shifting away from approaches that implicitly frame the working body as an object, or place as the neutral, pre-social backdrop against which social action (in this case work) takes place, in favour of a

methodology equipped to ‘grasp’ lived, embodied experience as the site of the knowing self. To this end, ‘grasping’, or getting a grip, is not only an empirical and analytical term for us (as noted above), but also a methodological one, as we set out to ‘grasp’ (i.e. develop an embodied understanding of) lived experiences of working in a particular place.

In focusing on the ‘particularities’ to which Van Maanen refers, and adopting a phenomenological lens informed by Merleau-Ponty’s post-dualist ontology and his conceptual framing of how selves, others and things ‘intertwine’, we devised methodologies that incorporated observational, visual and interview-based methods. As an example of how we did this, the interviews in both studies ranged from relatively unstructured, impromptu conversational-type exchanges to semi-structured interactions that were professionally transcribed. Observations provided ongoing opportunities to talk to a range of participants during quiet times on the market or sex shop floor, or during lunch breaks, after work drinks or through interim email contact. While undertaking interviews and observational research, photographic data were also collected or discussed, with participants in both studies steering us to photograph phenomena that they felt materialized their affective, embodied sense of their place of work. As such, in keeping with a phenomenological approach, meanings and connections emerged iteratively through an immersive process of sensitization in both studies, rather than via an a priori understanding established at the outset. This similarity in approach and underpinning philosophy enabled us to bring together these two longitudinal studies of established and emerging sectors of Soho’s economy, exploring working lives in the area’s sex and finance markets.

For clarity, each study was conducted separately but in parallel by the authors; data collection and analysis were discussed regularly between us as we worked at the same institution at the beginning of fieldwork, and together on other (related) projects since; this facilitated an ongoing, reflexive dialogue between us as ‘intertwined’ if not collaborative, researchers on this project. Kathleen’s study of men and women working in the financial services involved observations between 2010 and 2012 and interviews between 2010 and 2018 with 16 men and 10 women aged from early-20s to mid-50s (at the start of the study) who worked full time across the trading, operations and research functions in a Soho-based hedge fund, referred to using the pseudonym HFUK. By 2015, the hedge fund had closed in its current form and participants became scattered across London, the UK and elsewhere. Kathleen continued to maintain contact and to interview them formally once every two years as well as maintaining interim online contact with a number of them who would often get in touch with updates about notable work and life events.

Melissa’s research on men and women working in sex shops involved a series of interviews and observations with 16 men and six women working in licensed and unlicensed sex shops in Soho between 2008 and 2022. Access was negotiated through informal requests and subsequent snowballing. Six had managerial responsibilities (one as an area manager), and all but three worked on a full-time basis. At 19, Toby was the youngest participant, and in his late 60s, Richard (who was semi-retired) was the eldest, with a broad spread in between; participants identified themselves with a range of ethnic backgrounds. The age range and ethnic composition of both studies seemed broadly reflective of the sectors more generally, although we fully acknowledge that both the occupations

and demographics of our respective samples place significant boundary conditions around the studies, and our analysis, that limit possibilities for generalization.

Over the course of several discussions in which we noted emerging similarities in our thematic findings, we recognized that our parallel studies would benefit from further, collaborative analysis of how the working lives of the men and women we interviewed are situated in Soho as a very particular work place. Our methodological approach therefore builds on insights from earlier studies that bring together groups from different occupations to gain insights into how their working lives share common features (e.g. Hall et al., 2007; Pullen and Simpson, 2009).

Although quite different work groups, men and women from the hedge fund and working in sex shops share some important characteristics relating not simply to the geographical location in which they work, but also to the wider social and cultural connotations of Soho, of London as a city and of the specific sectors in which they work. Hedge funds exist in what has been termed the ‘shadow banking industry’ (Lemma, 2016) just as sex shops form part of the ‘shadow sex economy’ (Sanders, 2008). This common marginality meant that, when comparing our separate analyses from each project, we identified themes that wove together our research participants’ co-located experiences of working in relatively marginalized, ‘shadowy’ aspects of their respective sectors, in Soho. We therefore focus on these two occupational groups for two reasons that coalesce around their respective convergence and divergence. First, Soho is a fluid, transient place that is also clearly – culturally and geographically – defined and bound; it is a compact space but one that has global associations. This means that while people who work and consume there might be relatively transient, as many of our participants were, our respective interview-based data sets highlighted how they need to develop and demonstrate a capacity to ‘handle’ the place. Exploring how this is understood and experienced by two quite different work groups located in the same setting provides insight into the concept of place handling as an under-studied but salient aspect of working life. Second, the nature of their transience is different for sex shop workers, whose industry is historically tied to Soho, and bankers, whose industry is not (their sector is more traditionally associated with the City of London, further east - see Nash, 2018, 2022). Indeed, the bankers we studied are generally regarded as a Soho anomaly (i.e. they do not ‘belong’ there), and this is important to understanding their work experiences of the locale. Studying these two groups in Soho is therefore useful to reveal different ways of working in and through an iconic place, and of ‘handling’ it while/as doing so. Situating Soho and these two groups of people who work there in this way enables us to understand how place handling is experienced and enacted.

In terms of data analysis, once initial thematic coding had been completed separately for each study, we undertook a process akin to Gioia et al.’s (2013: 21) concept of ‘recycling’ where our combined analysis moved iteratively between ‘emergent data, themes, concepts, and dimensions and the relevant literature’. This enabled us to reanalyse both studies retrospectively focusing on themes relating to participants’ references to their work place. Specifically, we sought to bring together similar first order themes from each of the data sets to consider what underlying conceptual threads might re-emerge that would help us to understand the significance of place to their working lives. While this

analytical method was designed to aid progress, a 'phasic', linear approach was deliberately avoided; instead, the approach we took was designed to be as incremental, immersive and as interactive as possible. We did this by each re-working through our own data (the data we had collected independently), then discussing our coding of these data, challenging each other's interpretations and assumptions; we then worked through each other's data, to bring a different layer of analytical connections and observations to the process. Finally, we collated our coded data, and began to form a narrative commentary in order to move iteratively, drawing on Gioia's 're-cycling' method, between emerging themes in our combined data analysis, theoretical concepts derived from phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty's writing in particular) and the relevant literature. This dialogical approach enabled us to develop a reflexive analytical process through which we were able to surface and challenge embedded assumptions, including those derived from our earlier (independent) analyses and subsequent reading of the relevant literature, and our own everyday experiences of Soho as a social and research setting. It was through this analytical process that themes relating to 'handling' Soho and its associations came to the fore. As a result of this, and to reflect subsequent discussions between ourselves, our research participants, and other researchers we discussed the project with, we each followed up with more interview data collection to reflect on the emerging significance of place handling, and to incorporate research participants' views on the evolving thematic and theoretical analysis of the combined data. In this way, data collection and analysis, and the empirical and theoretical aspects of the study, merged into a back and forth, hermeneutic process, one that collapsed the distinction between the researchers as the knowing subjects and the participants and place as the 'objects' of that knowledge. The findings discussed below are reflective of that dialogical process.

Findings: Place handling as 'knowing how to get a grip' and 'when to let go'

As noted above, sex shop and hedge fund workers may seem, at first glance, as if they have little in common in terms of the material circumstances of their work. On the one hand, it is vital not to negate the economic, political and class conditions that mean there is clearly an uneven distribution of power, status and resources between these two groups of workers, not to mention vastly different day-to-day experiences of work. Yet, on the other hand, and of particular interest to us here, these two groups share certain important features in common associated largely with *where* they work. In our analysis below, we focus on how their respective work experiences and identities are situated in and through work place through focusing on two interrelated themes. First, we consider how participants had to develop and demonstrate an embodied capacity to handle working in Soho ('getting a grip'); second, we examine the extent to which the place handling involved knowing when and how to leave as a place-based experience. In our discussion, we consider how the dynamics of these two phenomena – getting a grip and letting go – indicate how an ability to 'handle' the place was not only framed in terms of an ability to cope with the sector and setting, but also specifically a demonstrable capacity to 'grasp' what is required in order to successfully sustain and navigate what it means to work there.

Getting a grip: Developing and sustaining the capacity to handle place

References to the skills and dispositions required to work there flowed through the hedge fund and sex shop workers' respective narratives of working in Soho. This was a capacity that our participants articulated in relation to themselves and also (particularly for those who had managerial responsibilities) what they looked for in others. In a way that illustrates the significance of Merleau-Ponty's 'self-others-things' nexus to understanding how Soho as a work place shapes perceptions and experiences of working there, Nathan, a sex shop area manager, explained how he used the recruitment process to appoint only those he thought demonstrated the ability to cope with the demands and associations of the area ('doing the place') and the products on sale in the sex shop he managed:

We've got a few set questions that we ask people that all the supervisors ask. But mostly we show them a few bits of literature [porn]. I've had people in before and they've answered questions quite well and then I've said, 'Right, this is a magazine we sell. This is [xxx]' . . . and some blokes'll go 'Oh, I'm not looking at that' and you go, 'What do you mean I'm not looking at that? Well, this is what we sell, this is what our customers come in for . . .' So you just know if that's going to put them off, *they're just not going to be able to do the job or the place for that matter.* (Emphasis added)

Daniel also referred to being able to 'handle' Soho as a work environment, 'the place, and the people' as an important sign of the ability to cope with the job, articulating this with reference to the sex shop he managed and referring (like Nathan) to the significance of the setting itself, in his description of what he looks for in a potential employee:

I prefer to interview in the store . . . I can tell if someone is okay in here. If they are okay with what we sell, but mostly with where we are. It's not for everyone. I assume that if someone comes in then they are okay with it . . . We can train for pretty much anything – using the till, stock taking, layout, etc. We have plans for stock layout that I draw up, so they just have to be followed, but not for that. *Being able to handle the place, and the people who come in here . . . that's the most important thing.* (Emphasis added)

Echoing this requirement to demonstrate capacity to simultaneously 'handle' the job, the people and the place, several other sex shop workers told us stories about what they called 'career defining moments' that they felt tested their ability to 'handle' the place, indicating their awareness of the need to demonstrate a capacity to cope with customers' expectations of how they could behave in the shops. Michael, for instance, recalled how during his first week of working in a sex shop, 'a man walk[ed] over with his penis out in the shop. You do get that . . . that was one of my first breaking moments . . . When I say breaking moment, as in "If I can handle this I'll stay".' Michael's encounter shaped his sense of having the capacity to cope with this kind of interaction, having demonstrated to himself, his coworkers and the store manager, as well as the customer involved, that he could cope with whatever the place, and its 'anything goes' ethos could throw at him, referring to this incident twice as a 'breaking moment'.

Similar notions of 'handling' the place, and of immersing oneself in it, were also central to how hedge fund workers articulated the situated nature of their work experiences.

For many, Soho provided a kind of place-based litmus test for future endurance. One trader, Alex, referred to the ‘robust constitution’ deemed necessary to surviving not simply the place and the sector, but the sector *in that place*, connecting the capacity to handle working in Soho to an ability to sustain a viable working life in finance, one that involved developing and demonstrating the right mindset, constitution, maturity and analytical ability. For Alex, handling capacity could be demonstrated through not getting overly ‘caught up’ in Soho’s seedier side (being able to ‘resist’ its temptations, thus demonstrating a strong ‘mindset’ and constitution), and crucially, by knowing when to ‘step away’. As Alex put it:

There are lots of temptations around to misbehave, to pursue excesses in terms of, say, booze or controlled pharmaceuticals or lifestyle, or whatever . . . you can get caught up in that. If you haven’t got the correct mindset, you haven’t got a robust constitution, but above all if you haven’t got the maturity and the analytical ability to realize *then you have to step away*. (Emphasis added)

Similarly, referring to a former colleague who had left the hedge fund, Whitney alluded to workplace rumours that conflated his poor performance with being unable to resist Soho’s many temptations, including the widespread availability of various forms of commercial sex and drugs: ‘he wandered off every day, like mid-afternoon or mid-morning, and you know we are in Soho, so people speculate where he’s been’. In a similar way to Michael and Nathan, here Whitney refers to Soho’s enduring associations with sleaze and temptation as significant to understanding contemporary experiences of working there; for sex shop workers, the ability to ‘handle’ Soho was part of their job, and a ‘breaking point’ for Michael, which enabled him to test his handling capacity; for Whitney’s former colleague, being unable to handle Soho was cited as a marker of, almost a proxy for, his poor performance, and inability to handle the job and the place in combination.

Not surprisingly, the ability to demonstrate mastery of one’s working life in this setting, to embody the kind of ‘intentional arc’ that Merleau-Ponty describes, was experienced and articulated in highly gendered ways. For some women working in the hedge fund, the cultural reputation of Soho meant that it represented a microcosm of the wider hegemonic associations of the financial sector. Anna suggested that being located there allowed a lot of gendered banter to linger on ‘in ways that wouldn’t be acceptable elsewhere in the City’. For example, there were often discussions of inexperienced workers having to prove in highly sexualized ways that they could ‘handle’ the market, involving bending them over desks to simulate sexual acts or taking them on after-work visits to lap dancing clubs in the area. Articulated as a fear of being seen as ‘prudish’ (Hayley), such accounts often resulted in women feeling out of place in both a geographical and occupational sense. Having to ‘handle’ being subjected to these kinds of practices was viewed as necessary in order for them to establish themselves and to sustain a viable working life not just in the hedge fund, but specifically in Soho (see also Nash, 2018, 2022).

Articulating similarly gendered expectations around men and women’s different capacities to ‘handle’ working in Soho, Shirley (who managed a sex shop) explained her ability to cope when describing how she dealt with customers who overstepped the mark and became aggressive towards her or her staff:

You will get customers that think that because you work in a sex shop, here, they have a right to abuse my staff and I'm on that straight away. I've never tolerated anybody swearing at me in whatever store I'm in. I can handle myself, and I can handle them. I just say 'out', done.

Taken together, these references to 'handling' oneself and others in the context of working in Soho, often experienced, and articulated in highly embodied ways, provide important insights into how participants secure and sustain their working lives there. In this sense, they bring to the fore how demonstrating, as Shirley and others emphasized, a highly situated capacity to cope in competitive or confronting work environments is central to working in Soho.

Just as our participants saw the need to handle Soho as integral to their embodied capacities to grasp and ensure what it means to work there, they also emphasized how Soho was simultaneously central to how work and the place itself, got a grip on them, as Alex alludes to above. In this way, a need to keep this grip in check was intimately connected to a broader orientation to their variegated experiences of work, and to references to the demands of sustaining a demonstrable capacity to handle Soho as a work place. The challenges associated with maintaining the ability to demonstrably handle working there – whether in the area's sex shops or in the finance market – were made more challenging by the fluidity, intensity and often informality of their working lives that left little to hold on to; features that were regularly connected with the broader 'slipperiness' of Soho itself, and of their ambivalent feelings about the place and its associations. In this sense, their ability to 'handle' Soho as work place was not only framed by a demonstrable ability to cope with the sector and setting, but also by how this related to a concomitant capacity to grasp what is required to successfully navigate the possibilities as well as the problems associated with working there. Brian, one of the hedge fund workers in our study summed this up when he said, you have to 'grab the market by the balls before it grabs you'.

Place handling as knowing when to let go: 'I'm a junkie for it'

In various ways, our research participants discussed how the challenges referred to above relating to the rigours involved in sustaining a demonstrable capacity to cope with Soho as a work environment had led them to question their work identities, providing the situated impetus for them to make radical changes to their working lives. Others described being unable to endure working in Soho for anything other than what they perceived to be a temporary period precisely because of their ambivalent feelings about what attracted them to working there; others described their sense of needing to move on for fear that they were becoming addicted, not to the many illicit temptations available for consumption in the locale, but to the place itself. For many, what had attracted them to Soho (its 'edgy' reputation, and enduring associations with drink, drugs and commercial sex) was, with the benefit of experience, what made them want to leave, and this was articulated largely with reference to their capacity to handle working there, or in the case of knowing when to let go, to leaving. And these feelings were grounded largely in concerns about the effect that the two sectors of work – sex shops and finance – were having on the area.

Regarding this latter point, both set of participants were aware of the way their organizations and sectors leveraged, or ‘cashed in’ on Soho’s reputation, with managers encouraging employees to ‘grasp’ what their work meant by virtue of being situated in Soho and the particularities of its long-standing associations as a place where ‘anything goes’. While sex shop workers placed this in the historical context of where people went to look for particular experiences or products (‘it’s because of what and where we are’, as Nathan put it), many of the hedge fund participants suggested that for their organization, Soho gave both kudos and substance to their occupations, which were often highly abstract, disembodied, technical and immaterial in nature. Being situated in Soho, with its enduring reputation as an ‘edgy’ place to work and consume, rather than in the more established City or Mayfair, also served as a ‘mark’ of distinction for the company they worked for, which was able to position itself as culturally distinctive, in a highly competitive market, simply by virtue of its location. For some of the hedge fund managers who worked there, such as Jamie, this provided a direct ‘edge’ to their work identities. As Jamie put it, ‘being in Soho and having [HFUK] on your CV [. . .] people don’t forget you . . . compared to the hundreds of other private equity firms across the City’. At the same time, many were aware that year on year, more people ‘like them’ in suits made up the tapestry of street traffic in the area. They mentioned that they were aware of the closing of an iconic record store in the area to make way for office premises inhabited by other financial services companies. Jacob reflected on his own complicity in sanitizing the area in both an immediate and a broader economic sense: ‘of course they [HFUK] were *cashing in on the cache*, and probably would be seen as giving very little in return, apart from raising the rent’ (emphasis added). Just as some of our participants cited Soho’s affective qualities and cultural associations as making their working there attractive, others were also more reflexively conscious of their organization appropriating Soho as a means of identification in a way that might detract from the less-savoury elements of their own sector of work.

In a similar way, although there was a perception that their sector of work had longer-established associations with Soho, the view of the sex shop workers was largely that the sector’s effect on the area continued to be detrimental, providing an enduring attraction for problematic visitors and consumers. As Nathan put it, ‘we get all sorts in here . . . drunk people, smack heads . . . It’s not good for us, or the area, especially for the girls [Soho-based sex workers].’ Michael also discussed the detrimental impact of the sex shops on the locale, referring specifically to the extent to which the sector continues to act as a tourist destination, perpetuating Soho’s global reputation for commercial sex: ‘if you’re a Soho tourist, you’re a different character [. . .] You’re going to be different. It’s almost like you can be a different person here. And that is intense during the tourist seasons.’ Here, Michael alludes to the extent to which, in his view, the area is ‘mishandled’ by the commercial sex industry’s appropriation of Soho as a tourist destination, attracting outsiders who can divest themselves of responsibility for their actions because of where they are, a problem that becomes particularly acute at specific points throughout the year.

It was against this backdrop that some participants, across both sectors, suggested that the place itself had been an important reference point for their decision to distance themselves from Soho, and by implication, from their sectors of work there. This was not necessarily about them involuntarily losing an ability to gain or maintain their ‘handling’

capacity, however, but rather, related to their reflections on the opportunities for reflexively re-thinking their working lives that being based in Soho had opened up, including the concerns about the exploitation or appropriation of the area itself ('cashing in on the cache') referred to above. Luca, for instance, suggested that being based in Soho, rather than in the more traditional areas of finance (like the City, or Mayfair), had in part prevented a 'brainwashing that all that matters is finance and the markets'. The vibrancy and history of the setting itself, he reflected, had contributed to him changing careers altogether and going into a more technical, practical occupation after he had come to the realization that a more materially orientated line of work (one that 'matters') would have more meaning for him. As Luca explained, alluding to a comparison between the tactility of the small-scale industries and workshops that have had a presence in Soho both historically and in the present (Speiser, 2017), and the 'hollowness' of finance's immateriality:

When you see the people that actually make stuff here . . . *I think that there's something about making stuff that makes you feel infinitely more useful.* I wasn't suited to finance, I can see that now, *it's like a bubble.* (Emphases added)

Similarly, Imogen, who had referred to her close affiliation with Soho's character in our early research interactions, later left the financial services sector to become a jazz singer, suggesting that:

the world of finance is really quite a myopic one, and can easily suck you in and [you] think it's the only kind of job you can have [. . .] my main fear is getting to my 40s and still being in a place [company] like this and thinking 'Holy crap, what did I do?'

A little like Luca, being located in and around more creative sectors of work, particularly the bars and clubs for which Soho is renowned, had provided the impetus and opportunity for Imogen to re-think what mattered to her in terms of her working life and identity. Being in Soho had provided her with the inspiration to leave it, both the place and the finance sector.

By comparison, the ambivalence of their 'grip' on Soho as a work place was discussed by many of our sex shop participants as one reason for the transient nature of the sector, and for high turnover, mainly owing to the stigma associated with working there, but also because of the extremities of experience that were encountered on a daily basis, including requests for (illegal) child or animal-based pornography. As Nathan put it, referring to the latter, 'you get used to it, but it does really get to you, and eventually I'm going to have to say, "enough is enough" and move on'. Although the sex shops are a distinctive and enduring feature of the area's material landscape, few of our participants saw working there as anything other than a relatively temporary arrangement, and as a distinctive period in their working lives. As Stewart suggested:

You get a lot of people coming and going and . . . obviously *a lot of people come in who just want it to be a temporary thing . . . I mean I think a lot . . . sort of want to see themselves in a respectable job . . .* I suppose you don't imagine many kids going to the . . . school careers advisor and saying, 'I really want to work in a sex shop'. (Emphasis added)

In a similar vein to our hedge fund participants, sex shop workers reflected on the challenges of working in a sector – and a setting – from which people might seek to ‘escape’ as soon as they can. Although the place and all that it offered in terms of interest and excitement clearly appealed to him Michael alluded to this when he described how what attracted him to working in Soho – ‘because it’s such an all-night time place’ – also meant that regular encounters with drug dealers, travelling home alone late at night, and interactions with what he described as ‘unsavoury characters, just nasty people’, were regular occurrences. For him and others, this was why working there was only considered to be a temporary period in their working lives and that staying there would be perceived as a kind of ‘mishandling’ of this intent. Mark summed up how many sex shop workers understood this when he said, ‘you have to put this brave front on, . . . you have to have your wits about you . . . and you can only do that for so long’. Even Davina, who worked in a specialist lingerie shop and described herself as a collector of S&M clothing and accessories, and who found the area ‘a really inspirational place to work’ said that she did not plan to work there for more than a couple of years. As she put it:

The place has such a buzz about it . . . And I’m a junkie for it . . . It’s hard to describe but I feel the most alive I can be when I’m here [the place or the shop?] . . . both, for me they are the same. It’s the people, it’s the place . . . but I will move on [why do you feel you will need to move on?] . . . This place takes a lot out of you. It can be exhausting. You have to keep your wits about you and that’s tiring . . . And the place is really exhausting . . . You can only do it for so long.

When asked about what her future plans involved, Davina said ‘I’ve learnt a lot from working here. I’ll probably try to set up on my own.’ In this moment of reflexivity, Davina seems to reflect a view that was widely shared by men and women working across both sectors of work that we interviewed, namely that Soho is a place that draws you in but that you can demonstrate your capacity to handle precisely by knowing when and how to let go.

Discussion: Understanding the dynamics of work as place handling and vice versa

Through ‘placing’ working lives in our discussion of the dynamics of getting a grip and letting go, our analysis suggests that the capacity to handle place is dependent upon a variety of elements that bring together self and others’ perceptions, and the ‘things’ that comprise the setting itself. The situated and relatively precarious, ambivalent nature of their grip means that our participants’ work lives and identities are different from say, the cooks in Fine’s (1996) study of professionals who are located in one unique place, restaurant kitchens, and from the mobile managers in Petriglieri et al.’s (2019) study, eager to move on while remaining rooted to a nominal place. While Fine (1996: 90) emphasizes how occupational identities are ‘a means of placing oneself and being placed by others’, for our participants this ‘placing’ involved bringing together perceptions of place, and processes of placing enacted by themselves and others, in ways that intertwined with the materiality of the setting, which both compelled and in some senses also

repelled their sense of identification with it, including reflexively so (e.g. in their concerns about the impact of their respective sectors on Soho as working community, and in anticipating their capacity to know when and how, and why, to leave). ‘Grasping’ this dynamic, in a way that reflects how our participants did so, enables us to understand their experiences of inhabiting Soho as their work place, at the same time as striving not to be overly identified with, or bound to it (e.g. our participants wanted to experience Soho’s ‘illicit’ associations, while not being perceived as such themselves). Hence, their highly localized transience meant that, for our participants, finding and maintaining a balance between identifying with the locality and keeping it at arm’s length was important to their working lives; in other words, our participants seemed to want to experience Soho without themselves being ‘consumed’ by it. Or in Merleau-Ponty’s terms, they needed to learn to handle it, and to be able to demonstrate their capacity to do so, without holding on to it or becoming overly absorbed, ‘gripped’, by it.⁷

If Merleau-Ponty’s (2002 [1945]: 79, emphasis added) emphasis is on the need to understand how ‘the psychical determinants and the physiological *gear into each other*’, our study shows how this gearing process produces a sense of perceived physicality that helps us to understand how learning to work in Soho involves not simply getting to grips with its meanings and associations, but also with the physical experience of the place including its layout, aesthetic and rhythms as these shape the place’s working days, weeks and yearly cycles (Nash, 2022), as Michael in particular noted with reference to working in Soho at night, and at the peak of the tourist season. ‘Placing work’ in this way enables us to make sense of how a distinct work place like Soho does not pre-exist the work undertaken by those who work there, including across different occupational groups, but is the accumulated outcome of the work that they do to ‘make’ place, in part, through grasping and holding onto it, but also by letting go. Our participants speak, in different ways, of trying to grasp Soho, to engage with what it is, who one is there, and of what it means to them as their place of work. They recount trying to handle it, of finding ways to derive pleasure from it and of trying to ensure that it does not harm them or others. As Murphy (2022: 26, emphasis added) notes, ‘maximal grip explains the body’s capacity to obtain bodily equilibrium, by refining its responses *in accordance with the particulars of the situation*’; experienced as he describes it, as a ‘felt sense of rightness, when we develop an optimal grip on things’. While the motorcycle repairers in his study had to demonstrate their ‘know how’ specifically in their technical competence, the sex shop workers and hedge fund managers we interviewed had to develop and deploy their capacity to simultaneously cope with other people, things and the setting itself, in the context of the associations and expectations that accompany working and consuming in Soho and their respective sectors. They try to comprehend (‘grasp’ in a perceptual sense) how to best hold on to it, like a prize, but also have to maintain the ability to move on and handling the place is what happens when this dynamic is understood and experienced (i.e. knowing how to ‘get a grip’ and when and how to let go). Their aim, in other words, seems to be a focus on how to gain and maintain a firm grasp on the place in a way that allows them to retain a ‘loose hold’ on it, one that is both distant and proximal and that enables them to, in some instances reflexively, consider how their work is shaped by the place and vice versa (i.e. how their work organizations and sectors impact on the locale by ‘cashing in’ on its cache, or global reputation as an ‘edgy’ place to live, work and

consume). Such elements are key to how the people who work there experience and demonstrate their capacity to 'handle' Soho as a place, in the moment of their work experience, and over time in their working lives and in changing circumstances, including as they move on, or expect to.

These are challenges for many people who have fluid working lives and identities, in relatively precarious sectors of work and in what might be understood as relatively transient settings, providing insight into how work 'unfolds' in and through places. Unpacking the 'prise' that place has on people, and vice versa, and thinking through the different meanings attached to it, helps us to understand how part of the allure of some places, like Soho, is that one can never really have a 'firm hold' on them – their elusive nature – beyond our 'grasp' is part of what makes them appealing as work places, and our participants speak to this theme as well (e.g. as 'junkies for it'). Paradoxically, this means that gaining and displaying a capacity to handle working somewhere like Soho involves, at least in part, an ability to let go of the need to hold on, to 'go with the flow' and to relinquish one's perceived sense of having to maintain a tight grip on normative notions of work as a bounded place and entity. With regard to the latter, our participants chose to work in Soho, at least in part, because it enabled them to move relatively fluidly between work and other aspects of their lives, given that many of them consumed the place itself during and outside of their work spaces and times.

The accounts considered above illustrate then, how situated working lives and identities 'take place', that is, they come into being through a mutually constitutive relationship between the place as a physical location and series of 'objects' (e.g. its building, shops, streets and pavements, bars and clubs, etc.) and the meanings and associations of these, and particularly the expectations and experiences they are 'intertwined' with. 'Grasping' this, as our participants do, foregrounds the importance of setting in shaping the dynamic and ongoing ways in which the hedge fund and sex shop workers we studied perceived and experienced their work. The expectation that they could demonstrate the capacity to 'handle' working in Soho was central to how their working lives were experienced, and this was articulated through a situated awareness of the area's history, geography and evolving but also enduring associations, including with sleaze (Speiser, 2017).

Of particular significance to the broader analysis of work and place is how the narrative accounts of both sets of workers invoke Soho as *situating* their working lives in this very particular setting. Much like the lawyers and marketing consultants in Waring and Waring's (2009) analysis of discourses of professionalism in the City of London, the men and women in our studies shared a set of narrative expectations associated with what it means to work *in Soho*. Yet these were also shaped by a broader perception of the affective connections the place afforded, and through making their viability a matter of 'handling' the setting, meaning they simultaneously 'did' their job and the place, as Nathan described it.

Attention to work and place in this dynamic, mutually constitutive way is thus important to understanding how working lives are perceived and experienced in highly situated ways in other sectors and settings. The phenomenological lens that we have adopted and advocated here recognizes that the ways in which we apprehend, engage with and make meaning of the world in situ is an ongoing and embodied 'creative operation' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1945]: 62), one that draws together perceptions, practices and settings. It is

a lens that highlights how work and place are mutually constitutive as expectations, associations, actions and experiences that 'gear into' one another. Further, it brings to the fore how work is lived and experienced in a particular setting in ways that speak to what 'appears in our desires, our evaluations and our landscape more clearly than it does in objective knowledge' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1945]: xxxii), emphasizing the significance of perception to understanding how work identities are lived and experienced in the context of specific sectors and settings.

We agree with Salamon's (2012: 244) reading of Merleau-Ponty that throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, the grip is used to signal 'a strategy for managing failure rather than an example of sure-footed mastery'. Understanding grip in this phenomenological sense, as an orientation outward, is an insightful way of describing (grasping) our engagement and enmeshment with the world, including the world of work that is of concern to us here. And in considering place through this phenomenological lens, distance is an important and related concept, as the findings discussed above illustrate. In the chapter on space in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 261) describes gazing at an object retreating down the road and watching as the object 'is beginning to slip away from the grip of our gaze and is less closely allied to it. Distance is what distinguishes this loose and approximate grip from the complete grip which is proximity.' This sense of the grip being one that is distant, 'loose and approximate', or more complete when it is proximal helps us to understand both how place shapes working lives in ways that are experienced through identification and dis-identification, and over time, when particular associations and expectations themselves have a looser or tighter 'grip' on the place in ways that shape work identities and experiences. Merleau-Ponty explains how a cultural object (e.g. in this instance, a place) comes to be embodied in ways that sustain its meanings and associations over time, so that 'before becoming the indication of a concept it is first of all an event which grips my body, and this grip circumscribes the area of significance to which it has reference'.⁸

In this respect, we have shown how situating the connection between work and place brings to the fore a setting's active role in shaping the ways in which identities are enacted through particular place-based qualities, through work becoming an 'area of significance' to which working lives have and make reference. Although these qualities may be more or less attached to occupations or sectors, and may be so in ambivalent and evolving ways, they highlight that working lives are not simply located in 'a place' or 'the city' at an abstract, conceptual level, but are felt in the particularities of a specific setting at a distinctive point in time, in the 'work' done by the place itself, so to speak and its enduring associations. This problematizes notions of working lives as rationally driven, planned and executed in a social, cultural or geographical vacuum, or as attached to and enacted primarily within and through particular professions, occupations, sectors of work or organizational contexts. For our research participants, working in Soho was, at least for a time, their primary work identity, signifying more than simply where they worked in a geographical sense, but their capacity to 'handle' the connotations of working in a setting such as Soho; but they were also keen not to be 'gripped' by this identity, or the place itself (to become 'addicted', or 'sucked in'). Our theoretical approach also highlights how working lives are enacted in what, to borrow from Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]), we might think of as the dynamic nexus of perceptions and practices that constitute work

lives precisely as they are ‘placed’. In this sense, ‘placing’ work in this way highlights the importance of the ineffable qualitative experience of working lives given that part of this experience is articulated through affective references to being drawn to the area, or (and often at the same time) being repelled by it; as a theoretical approach derived from phenomenological insights, ‘placing’ work in this way enables us to understand more about how work places are handled, including through the dynamics of getting a grip on them and knowing when and how to let go. Recognition of an affective experience of one’s working life and identity may also help to explain how perceptions and practices play out in particular settings in this pre-cognitive realm, and their consequences; in other words, affectivities may ‘destabilise and unsettle’ (Fotaki et al., 2017: 3) our rational models for understanding what work is and how it ‘takes place’ in the ways in which it is discussed here with reference to place handling.

The emphasis that our participants place on ‘handling’ the area as an identity marker provides the opportunity to further conceptualize how place becomes central to the way work-based capacities are rendered visible and are subsequently negotiated, including along gender lines and other axes of identity. The accounts of handling as testing one’s mettle through the interaction of identity, disposition and setting illustrates how Merleau-Ponty’s (2002 [1945]: xiv) notion of *prise*, or outward-orientated ‘optimal grip’, involves being able to attune ourselves, in an embodied sense, to the ongoing demands of our engagement with the world. It further highlights how work, identity and place gear into each other in ways that are constantly shifting, in a *particular* setting that itself is a fluid, multi-dimensional social, economic, cultural and geographical landscape. In practice, this means that the working lives of those we studied intertwined, to borrow Merleau-Ponty’s (2002 [1945]: 138) term, with the constantly changing nature of the organizations, sectors and setting in which they work, and of the place itself.

Concluding reflections

Our focus in this article has been on Soho as an iconic place through which people ‘get a grip’ on their working lives, in and through where they are situated. In response to two questions, we have developed the theoretical argument that it is not just working within the context of a specific building (e.g. an office, shop, or home-work space) that people have to get a hold of and/or get held by; work place settings like Soho are far more than context and are sometimes as significant, if not more so, than a person’s immediate workplace. We have illustrated this argument with reference to data derived from a longitudinal study of the working lives of two groups of relatively under-researched workers, namely men and women working in a hedge fund, and in licensed sex shops. The questions we set out to address were: how are working lives shaped by the demands and expectations associated with a particular workplace? And how are work identities enacted to demonstrate a capacity to cope with place-based demands, expectations and associations?

Drawing on insights from Merleau-Ponty’s (2002 [1945]) *Phenomenology of Perception*, we have responded to these questions by considering how work is experienced in situ. We have shown, with reference to their accounts, how where work is situated serves to compel and constrain perceptions of what is possible in terms of how it is experienced and enacted. This has enabled us to bring to the fore the ways in which work

identities and experiences do not simply coalesce around particular occupations, sectors of work or professions, but do so through particular settings that have distinctive geographical, historical or cultural associations, ‘handling’ of which becomes an important identity marker for those involved. Highlighting this emphasizes the importance of a situated understanding of how working lives are experienced and made sense of, illuminated theoretically by drawing together insights from phenomenology and the sociological analysis of work places.

Attention to setting also provides insight into more practical implications for how we think about working lives and identities as porous phenomena influenced by a multiplicity of occupations and professions that cohere in one place. In contrast to some approaches to urban planning that seek to have offsite parks or hubs of expertise (such as ‘science parks’ or ‘innovation centres’), the meeting and mingling of significantly different occupations, sectors or ways of making a living in a particular place prevent the formation of myopic work environments or ‘market-based monocultures’, to use one of our participant’s terms. For example, the sense of working lives being situated beyond a siloed set of occupational or organization-based practices might have broader consequences for the ‘sector think’ often attributed to seismic economic events. As such, ‘placing work’ becomes not simply a perceptual or experiential phenomenon, or a theoretical or analytical approach, but also constitutes an activity that could hold ethical possibilities for how we navigate our working lives in relation to others in the future, and as we explore the possibilities attached to new ways of working together, including in situ, in the wake of COVID-19 and commitments to more sustainable work environments.

At the same time, while our research participants work in (or had worked in) a distinctive location, the increasing importance of place-making within city planning and regeneration projects across the globe suggests that more and more working lives and identities will become constituted not simply through urban settings, but with reference to an assemblage of particular, localized networks of historically and geographically embedded expectations and associations that have global significance. Focusing on setting therefore further emphasizes the importance of situating work, that is, of doing and understanding working lives as situated phenomena located within what is often a highly localized yet globally significant dynamic nexus of meanings and materialities (Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1945]) that require careful and considered ‘handling’. Again, ‘placing work’ thus helps us to understand more about how working lives are shaped by geographical locations and vice versa, that is, how particular places are shaped by the working subjectivities and sectors that inhabit and enact them in ways that are often, arguably increasingly, simultaneously global and highly local. Thinking about work in this way further extends phenomenological conversations about the ways that organizational lives might intertwine through the materiality of context and the meanings within which they become imbued and take on particular forms or cultural significance (Chugh and Hancock, 2009; Dale, 2005; Murphy, 2022).

We would suggest that further research is needed in order to understand more about the situated work of individuals, sectors and crucially, of the histories and futures of distinctive working communities, including how they are imagined and practised not only in the particularities of other sectors and settings, but also in relation to each other. Of particular interest may be to explore the dynamics of how and why working lives,

sectors and communities ‘take place’ in the way they do in a wider range of settings. Drawing on a phenomenological understanding of work as a situated practice that puts the specific experiences, expectations and associations shaping distinct communities to work, and that in doing so puts work ‘into place’, provides an important starting point for this endeavour.

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Notes

- 1 This aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s writing has been developed by feminist theorist, Iris Marion Young (2005) in her work, *Throwing Like a Girl*. Here, Young analyses gendered modalities of embodiment by comparing how a masculine emphasis on embodied capacity and habitual-ity contrasts with the inhibited comportment and constrained movement of girls and women as they take up feminine subject positions, showing how becoming feminine involves learning to ‘throw like a girl’, that is, to demonstrate femininity through/as bodily inhibition.
- 2 Our analysis was mindful of Heidegger’s account of ‘ready-to-hand’ (Zuhanden) versus ‘present-at-hand’ (Vorhanden) modes of engagement with the world as extremely influential on Merleau-Ponty’s (2002 [1945]) elaboration of prise (‘grip’) in particular, but also on his explication of the corporeality of the lifeworld more generally.
- 3 Here and throughout the article, we use a sociological definition derived from Studs Terkel’s (1972) classic study of *working life* as the time spent ‘at’ work, taking this to refer simultaneously to action (doing work) and place (being at work in a locational, or situational sense). We also draw from his understanding of working lives as being shaped by the search for meaning, identity and recognition, as well as material recompense (the ‘daily bread’ he refers to). To this definition, we add a phenomenologically informed understanding of working lives as situated not just within the context of particular national or regional contexts, or within specific industries, sectors or occupations but also within the distinctive locales that shape what they are made to mean and how they are experienced over time.
- 4 We use this phrasing very specifically to reflect Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of a non-dualist way of approaching our corporeal engagement with the world; that is, one that draws our attention to the way in which we assume that ‘grasping’ has two distinct meanings – one embodied, the other analytical – to highlight how Merleau-Ponty’s ontology encourages us to ask ourselves whether this really is two different meanings, foregrounding what we might gain from approaching it as one.
- 5 For clarification, informed by Merleau-Ponty’s writing on optimal grip, we use the term ‘handling’ here to refer to the ways in which the affective experience of a particular setting situates

working life (as our participants discuss in their accounts of their capacity to ‘handle’ the place and its associations). Understanding being able to ‘handle’ a place as an emotional, aesthetic and embodied capacity provides an opportunity to explore how a particular setting both compels and repels workers’ affective experiences and perceptions. By ‘handling’, then, we refer to the ways in which attempts to master and meaningfully enact and sustain a working life in a particular setting require a capacity to cope with its specific demands and associations, in order both to gain admission and acceptance (‘to get a grip’), and to endure one’s working life there (‘to hold on’). In other words, we use the term ‘handling’ to refer to the practices associated with ‘getting a grip’ on – and in – a place, and with enduring one’s working life in that setting, and to convey the significance of being able to demonstrate the capacity to do so as a marker of one’s work identity. In the sectors of work we explore, we show how this capacity is influenced not just by what people do, and how, but by *where* it is enacted and experienced.

- 6 It is difficult, at this stage, to anticipate the long-term impact of COVID-19 on this phenomenon; that is, to consider how the prevalence of online working might either diminish, accentuate or otherwise alter this kind of place attachment, and its relationship to working practices and experiences. But we note that it will be interesting and important to understand how this evolves.
- 7 A subtle distinction that Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]) makes, in his discussion of space as the locus of embodied experience, is important here. At the risk of over-simplification, he distinguishes the idea of ‘complete grip’ as a proximal phenomenon from ‘proximal grip’ as an experience or perception of distance, a distinction that speaks to the idea of not understanding how to handle Soho without an experience of being ‘in’ it but at the same time, of being unable to fully (i.e. reflexively) grasp it while being immersed in it. For our participants therefore, it was only when we encouraged them to adopt something of an outsider’s perspective, or reflectively, after they had moved on and recalled working there, that they were able to discern their sense of what it means to work there as an ongoing struggle to get and maintain a grip but also, to articulate their concerns about the ‘grip’ that their sector of work has on Soho.
- 8 Referring to the word ‘dampness’ for example, he suggests that on hearing the word, ‘damp’ we develop a sense of what it means, which is felt rather than merely thought, and he describes this as a ‘grasping’ of the word in its ‘complete appearance’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1945]: 235), that is, through meanings that are simultaneously cognitive and bodily.

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