

Autonomous precarity or precarious autonomy? Dilemmas of young workers in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Informed by autonomist perspectives on precarious work and labour subjectivity, this article discusses the dynamics between autonomy and job precarity. Based on purposive sampling, the qualitative findings, drawn from interviews with precarious workers aged 18–29 years in Hong Kong, reveal tensions among four types of aspirations. First, the desire for achieving freedom and individual ambition in work made the respondents critical of the notion of employment-related stability. Second, a determination to break with mainstream career paths empowered young people to take alternative pathways to new modes of work and life. Third, precarious employment was seen as a stepping stone for realising plans for travel or study. Finally, tolerance of precarity was perceived as a transitional stage in their striving for future stability. However, the findings also show the structured dilemmas experienced by young workers regarding the complex relationship between autonomy and precarity in a neoliberal labour market. Some young workers pursued work–life autonomy, constrained by precarious employment relations, acknowledging and bearing the costs, while some strategically used precarity in individual negotiations with employers to realise their goals. This article analyses young workers' subjectivity through the lenses of autonomy and age and pushes the boundary of precarity studies beyond an implicit dichotomy between determinism and voluntarism.

JEL codes: I38, J38, J62

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Keywords

Autonomism, creative work, Hong Kong, labour market flexibility, labour subjectivity, neoliberalism, non-unionised work, precarious work, precarity, worker autonomy, young workers, youth labour market

Introduction

Precarious youth employment as a field of research and policy study has gained increasing attention (Junankar, 2015; MacDonald, 2016; Mojsoska-Blazevski et al., 2017). By bringing the issue back to an emphasis on autonomy-focused and age-specific perspectives, this research article discusses the experiences and aspiration of young precarious workers in Hong Kong. Instead of seeing young workers as a group of reactive agents making decisions based on rational calculation of interests, a more dynamic approach to addressing workers' demand for autonomy and age-specific aspirations is necessary to unpack the complex subjectification and sense-making of young precarious workers. Informed by 'autonomist' perspectives, this article first links precarious work and precarity to the notions of autonomy, followed by a conceptual discussion of being young and doing precarious jobs. The youth employment conditions in Hong Kong are outlined to set the scene of the research. After presenting the research design and methods, findings are analysed, with emphasis on age-specific aspirations and dilemmas of structure and agency. The final discussion and conclusion section brings the findings to a broader understanding of social context and labour market dynamics. The article's particular contribution to the field of precarious employment studies lies in its linking of precarity to autonomy in a non-Western context characterised by individualised employment relations.

There is now a body of literature attributing the rise of precarious employment to the structural and institutional changes in the labour market under late capitalism. The neoliberal states, depending on their historical paths, have adopted various workfarist measures to cut back social protections and re-regulate labour markets by upholding supply-side intervention models in a quest for flexibility and the recommodification of labour (Greer, 2016; Standing, 2011). Regarding institutional arrangements that promote the precarisation of work, two strands of process are identified in Europe: dualisation in conservative and corporatist countries and liberalisation in liberal and southern European countries (Prosser, 2016). Therefore, the production of precarious employment is far from being the process described under the misleading theme of 'de-regulation'; instead, it is associated with policy changes designed to re-embed the labour market in a neoliberal framework (Rubery et al., 2016). Another line of analysis suggests that financial capitalism exacerbates inequalities in the name of labour flexibility, resulting from corporations' pursuit of short-term profits and maximised dividends for shareholders (Tridico, 2017). As a result, labour costs are further squeezed by changing the employment relationship in favour of capital, especially in strongly neoliberal regimes. While a set of structural social forces is well addressed in many research studies on precarious employment, the issue of how workers make sense of employment precariousness has not yet received much attention (Kalleberg and Vallas, 2017), particularly in an economy such as Hong Kong's.

While Standing's (2011) conceptualisation of the precariat, precarity, and precariousness is somewhat confusing (Frase, 2013; Kalleberg, 2018), Campbell and Price (2016) suggest five domains for conceptual clarity in expanding the scope of precariat and precarity studies. First, 'employment precariousness' refers to job quality and characteristics associated with insecurity, low pay, unemployment risks and so on (Kalleberg, 2018). Second, 'precarious work' refers to different employment relations and forms, such as the varieties of atypical and non-standard employment. Third, the concept 'precarious workers' focuses on a particular workforce segment experiencing various kinds of precariousness along with their own perceptions and responses (Vallas and Christin, 2018). Fourth, the thesis of the 'precariat' defines the political agency of a new class who is endlessly stuck in the lowest end of labour market and insecure employment and calls for new organising strategies instead of traditional unionisation (Standing, 2011). Finally, 'precarity' is taken as a way of life which is characterised by a state of precariousness expanding from employment to other spheres of life (Campbell and Price, 2016). Wilson and Ebert (2013) highlight the precarity experienced, perceived and interpreted by workers based on their everyday life in 'precarious work-societies'.

Based on this typology, the present article examines young precarious workers' aspirations for autonomy and their lived experiences of precarious work and precarity. The investigation of workers' autonomy and precarity should be situated in the tension between the pursuit of economic liberty and that of socio-political freedom against the backdrop of neoliberalism which promotes economic freedom, the market liberty to self-regulate and individual liberty to maximise utility (Cahill, 2014). Participation in the labour market and paid employment, therefore, is the best site to realise workers' values and to fulfil the work ethic, which overrides the importance of democracy (Amable, 2011). As neoliberalism generally opposes democratic worker involvement and the protection of labour at the workplace and marketplace, its economic-moral imperatives in reality conflict with labour's demands for autonomy to govern their individual and collective working lives. Bruff (2014) and Bloom (2016) pinpoint the disciplinary character of authoritarian neoliberalism against the socio-political autonomy of labour. Multiple strategies to police labour are necessary for an authoritarian-neoliberal state to materialise and justify the deepened commodification of labour and the life-world. Consequently, neoliberalism as illiberalism requires authoritarian governance to maintain the 'tyranny' of market order and satisfy corporate needs for socio-political stability (Bloom, 2016). In this regard, precarity and precariousness are linked to the result of economic freedom of enterprises, while labour's aspiration of autonomy is about the pursuit of socio-political freedom. Labour as an economic and socio-political subject is shaped by the politics of precarity and autonomy under neoliberalism.

Autonomist perspectives on precarious workers and employment

Precarious workers' making-sense of employment can be linked to their relatively autonomous expectations and practices that constitute the subjectification of labour (Morgan et al., 2013; Trott, 2013). This approach differs from those that focus on objective indicators of precarity and autonomy. Some empirical studies measure the

autonomy of workers in terms of working time and workplace engagement. Esser and Olsen (2012) find that workers' autonomy, conceptualised in terms of overall job control and influence on organisational practices, is shaped by their skill specificity and unionised power. It has also been found that the recent growth of work pressure is outstripping that of work autonomy in Europe (Lopes et al., 2014). The extent of autonomy is often seen as reflected in working-time flexibility and workers' involvement in deciding the content and pace of work (Wheatley, 2017). While autonomy is generally thought to increase life and job satisfaction, it also favours work intensification. In a study of young precarious workers, the respondents are found to have normalised the precarious status of creative industries as a generational feature and to accept the phenomenon of 'vocational restlessness' (Morgan et al., 2013), while they feel disaffected with lifelong jobs they nevertheless long for income security. Therefore, young precarious workers may display ambivalent perspectives on their agency at the early phase of their career and life course. These findings call for a thorough study of how young people's decisions, motivations and capacities intersect with age, institutional and organisational settings (Tomlinson et al., 2018).

The increasing emphasis on workers' autonomy tends to identify autonomy as an indicator of job quality (except Morgan et al., 2013), rather than as an important facet of labour's subjectivity. Informed by Italian Autonomist Marxism, Trott (2013) situates precarity and autonomy in the emancipatory politics of labour, referring to the general commonality and necessity of ordinary workers. Borrowing the controversial concept of 'multitude' from Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004), this perspective argues that the multitude, as a large heterogeneous group of the working population (including migrants, youth and older workers), embodies the political subjectivity and spontaneity of the masses who can act and organise against the contemporary 'Empire'. In other words, the multitude is the multifarious precariat with a plurality of identities but with openly related and generational specificity (Trott, 2013; Weeks, 2011). Gill and Pratt (2008) further argue that the informalisation, informationalisation and work innovation give rise to a category of 'immaterial labour' who produces intangible knowledge, services and media characterised by precarity, ephemerality, mobility and emotionality in their employment. This line of analysis generally refers to the affective and cultural labour of engaging in the creative industries, including the exploitation of relational and emotional values. On one hand, an autonomous space for immaterial labour is opened in the society as an expanded factory, which disperses and de-centralises production; on the other hand, immaterial labour's anxiety about income inadequacy coexists with their commitment to work.

Arguably, technological innovation transforms immaterial labour and cultural work's autonomy in three sites of struggle: affection, temporality and subjectivity, which is structurally shaped and yet individualised (Gill and Pratt, 2008). Affection means labour's pleasure and satisfaction through human interaction promoted by associational and cooperative power. Temporality entails the time of workers' participation and their work-life schedule. Apart from mediating between the materiality and meanings attached by workers (Weeks, 2011), the subjectivity of immaterial labour also includes labour activism resisting capitalist work in precarity politics (Jørgensen, 2016; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). The autonomist perspectives echo the 'post-work' thesis that goes beyond the

labourism and productivism of Marxism and the traditional socialist movement with an emphasis on refusal of and liberation from work (Frayne, 2015; Gorz, 1999; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Weeks, 2011). Labour autonomism considered as a theoretical project and political movement pushes for a revolutionary imagination to challenge the capitalist structure and the argument of structural determinism, which highlights labour's collective power and the political agency of disobedience and antagonism as the point of departure of class struggle. Weeks (2011) maintains that social life and personal existence for labour should be prioritised to reverse the domination of wage-work over human life. Autonomy in this sense is considered as an independence from the existing establishment, pursuing self-empowerment alongside the qualitative expansion of human needs. By shortening working hours and releasing more time and spaces for free and meaningful activity, the agenda of the autonomist perspective is to challenge the 'productivist' conception of work ethic (Gorz, 1999; Weeks, 2011).

In contrast to the conventional Left's implicit victimisation of labour under capitalism, autonomism affirms the power, particularly in the creative industries, to take back control of work and life (Eden, 2012). Aesthetic and professional autonomy are seen as fostering workers' capacities to craft creative works, defining the leeway to exercise self-determination at the workplace (de Peuter and Cohen, 2015). Precariousness and precarity are thus seen as 'negotiated' and 'relative', with the concept of immaterial labour invoked to demonstrate scepticism towards workerist identity centred on job stability.

While the autonomist perspectives criticise Standing's (2011) conception of the precariat and precarity as simplistic (Trott, 2013), both perspectives share an aspiration for labour's freedom and meaningfulness. Nevertheless, the emancipatory potential of immaterial labour and technological transformation is exaggerated in the autonomist analysis (Gill and Pratt, 2008), and an over-optimism about self-actualisation may overlook self-exploitation and compliance in current employment relations. Greer (2016) argues that the importance of materiality and the commodification of labour show no sign of decline but a gradual expansion under the neoliberalisation of welfare and labour policies. Moreover, the technological innovation hailed by autonomist perspectives is arguably Western-centric and does not reflect the large segment of low-skill work in the polarised global labour market (Bowring, 2004).

Despite this unresolved debate around autonomous imaginings of labour and work, the notions of autonomy and subjectivity can inform the research on precarious employment in at least two ways. First, precarious workers should be viewed as more than the victims of precarisation and the complexities of their expectations and meaning-making in precarious employment are worth more study. Second, the autonomist perspectives differentiate the *flexibility for labour* from the *flexibility for employers* promoted by neoliberal discourses (Bove et al., 2017). This distinction broadens the research agenda of precarious employment focusing on the subjectivity of precarious labour and their experiences of precarity. By studying how precarious workers adapt or pursue precarity, this article goes beyond the concept of autonomy in the job quality framework and examines the dilemma between labour's autonomous self-arrangement and subordination to precarious work. Therefore, qualitative understandings of autonomy are focused both inside and outside the workplace, and take account of the social construction of age and youthfulness.

Meanings and complexities of being young and doing precarious jobs

The autonomy-focused and age-specific approach to studying youth precarious employment has shed light on the interplay between labour market structures and the subjective perception of young people. On one hand, precarity is understood as an unusual state of employment of disadvantaged youth, which is extended to the employment experience of young workers in general; on the other hand, the experience of young precarious workers is heterogeneous, and higher costs and risks are borne by less privileged youth (MacDonald, 2016).

The concepts of a ‘precarious generation’ (Kretsos, 2010) or ‘generational precarity’ (Means, 2017) not only point to the material dimensions of youth precarious employment but also recognise the significance of socially constructed cultural and normative discourses (Vallas and Prener, 2012). As a result, how young workers perceive and interpret their working conditions matters to precarious worker studies in order to avoid one-way victimisation and economic-reduction of their choices and status. Despite the fact that some fashionable and popular brand name industries in ‘consuming work’ make young workers exploitable, the motivation of young workers’ involvement in such low-pay jobs may go beyond rational calculation (Misra and Walters, 2016). For instance, the identities of middle-class youth aesthetic labour in upmarket retail work are linked to the consumer interests and to the life-style branding of the corporates rather than to the identity of being a worker (Williams and Connell, 2010). Their work commitment is far from straightforward but may involve both satisfaction from specific occupations with precarious characteristics and potential difficulties for career development and livelihood. Misra and Walters (2016) outline the complexities of young retail workers’ experience, as they generally support the brands of clothing but are aware and unhappy with the precarious and poor terms of their employment. The work and identity tied to precarious employment is not restricted to the retail sector but also related to the media jobs. An empirical study has documented how young media workers internalise the occupational norms of the media industry under a discourse of personal branding, through which personal autonomy is defined in terms of the pursuit of status in distinctive markets (Vallas and Christin, 2018).

With the rise of ‘gig economy work’ characterised by the prevalence of digital business and new organisational work practices, the commodification of youthfulness extends from the extraction of physical labour power to the exploitation of immaterial power (Farrugia, 2018; Stewart and Stanford, 2017; Xia, 2018). While consumerist service economies require the qualities and imaginaries of youth, such as energy, creativity and body image as a means of valorising youth subjectivities, the age-based division of labour both enables and constrains young precarious workers. In a study on European Union (EU) employment, two groups of young temporary workers were identified (Nunez and Livanos, 2015). The first was a ‘by choice’ group who were overall younger and single and would prefer to gain experience and contractual flexibility. The second was the ‘without choice’ group, generally aged above 30 years and willing to work longer hours but unable to find permanent jobs. However, making a clear divide between voluntariness and involuntariness can be misleading, as youth’s decision and meaning-making process on precarious jobs are complex.

Regarding subjective perceptions, Burrows (2013) finds that young precarious workers exhibit awareness of job insecurity, yet they have no choice but to take up any available jobs in the neoliberal market. Chan (2013) identifies the dual identities shaped by financialised daily life and precarious work practice, in which insecurity is justified by the responsibilised discourses of calculation and investment choices, resulting in coping strategies of self-financialisation. While young workers' responses to precarity manifest their active roles and somewhat positive attitudes, it may be a rather 'cruel optimism' as young people still struggle between the promise of good life and opportunities and the reality of an uncertain future (Munford and Sanders, 2019). In their study of young knowledge workers, Armano and Murgia (2013) suggest that labour autonomy should be situated in precarious workers' self-identification with jobs and their informal networks in employment relations.

The studies on cultural industries and young workers underscore both self-fulfilment and weak unionisation compared to conventional industrial workers. This article therefore deploys ambiguous concept of autonomy to examine young precarious workers' experiences and perception in a non-western setting. The age-specific and autonomy-focused analysis requires a relational instead of a 'rational economic actor' approach to understanding the aspirations, difficulties and coping strategies of youth in precarious employment in Hong Kong.

The youth labour market in Hong Kong and its significance for studying autonomy

Many precarious employment studies tend to consider standard or stable employment as a state of equilibrium of labour relations, overlooking the long-lasting and deep-rooted employment precariousness inherited from the outset of capitalist labour markets (Quinlan, 2012). Mass production and the organisation of labour were the historical products of the Fordist-Keynesian welfare states established in the post-war era. This experience cannot be taken for granted and simply applied to other contexts. Accordingly, the prevalence of precarious employment in non-Western and Global South contexts is developed in trajectories which are different from those in their rich and democratic counterparts (Kalleberg and Hewison, 2013). In contrast to market-led precarisation, some Asian countries demonstrate a stronger role of the state in promoting precarious employment as a developmental strategy for competitiveness (Lee and Kofman, 2012). Moreover, the perceptions of precarious employment are shaped by institutional contexts and their cultural underpinnings.

The global financial crisis did hit the youth labour market in Hong Kong in 2009. However, youth unemployment and underemployment rates rapidly shrank in the aftermath of the crisis and have kept at a relatively stable level since 2011. Therefore, the recovery of the youth labour market in Hong Kong has been remarkable and youth employment conditions have been relatively stable in the past years (refer to Figures 1 and 2).

Moreover, the occupational and industrial proportions of young workers over the last 25 years also signal a rapid tertiarisation of the youth labour market (Figures 3 and 4). There have been significant changes in workers' occupations and industries, which indeed mirror the transformative nature of Hong Kong's economic restructuring overall. First, the

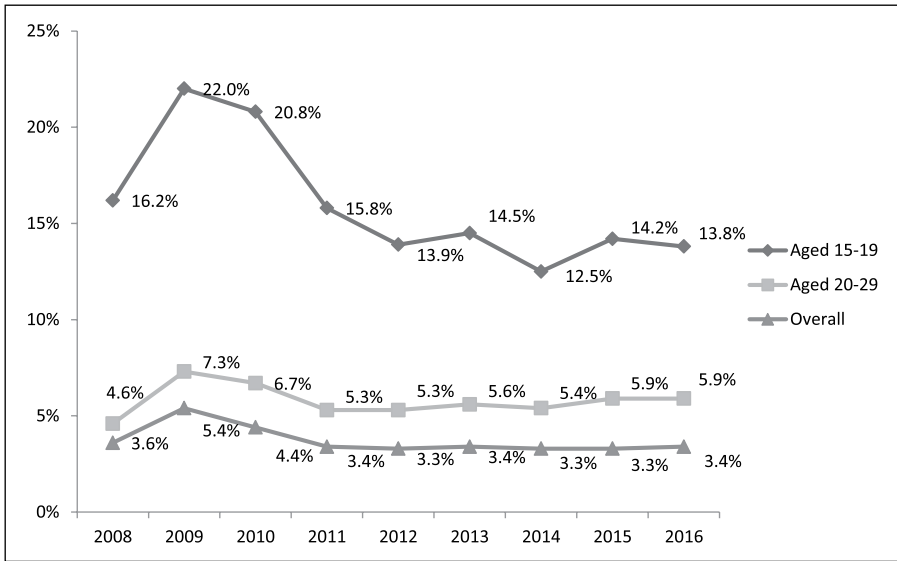


Figure 1. Youth unemployment rate, percent, Hong Kong, 2008–2016.

Source: Census and Statistics Department, Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2012 [2009], 2017 [2013].

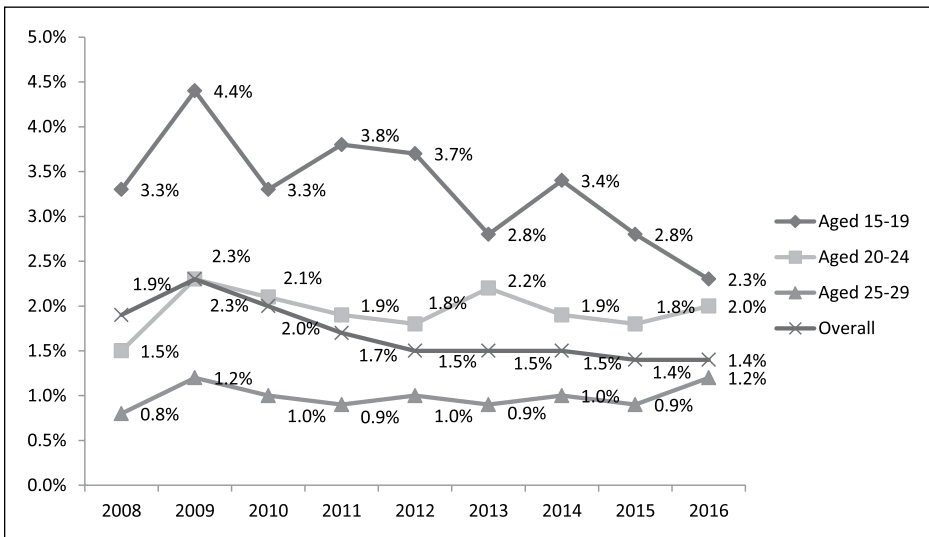


Figure 2. Youth underemployment rate, percent, Hong Kong, 2008–2016.

Source: Census and Statistics Department, Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2018 [2014].

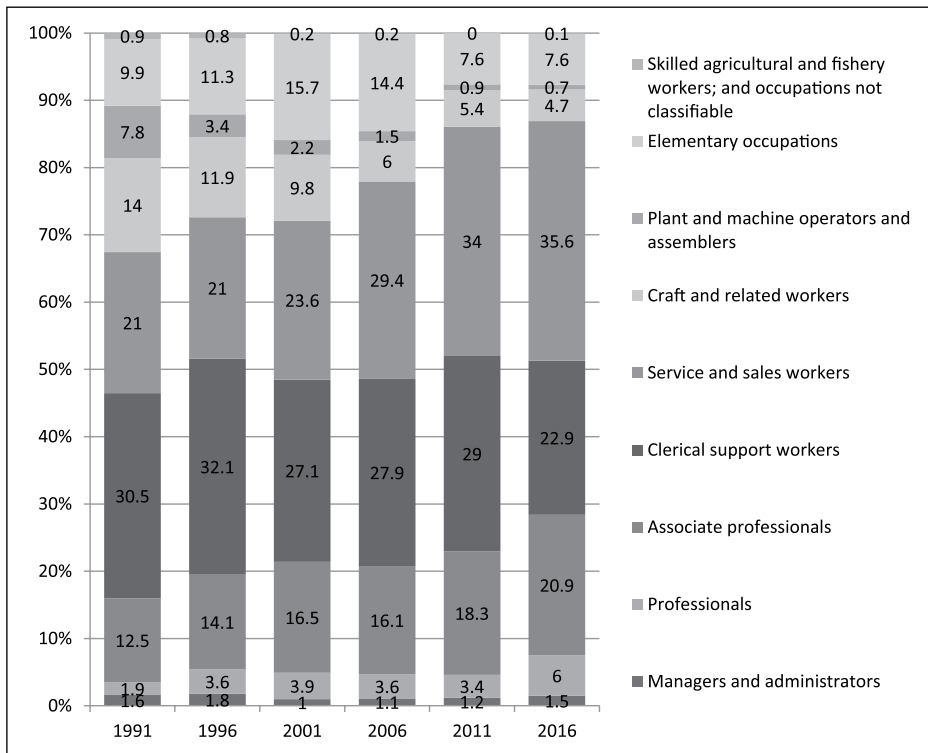


Figure 3. Changes over time in proportion of employed Hong Kong youth aged 15–24 years in various occupational groups, 1991–2016.

Source: Census and Statistics Department, Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (2002, 2008, 2013, 2018).

largest percentage drop occurs among craft and related workers and clerical support workers, while the greatest growth is concentrated among service and sales workers, and associate professionals. Second, the proportions across industries indicate a sharp decline of manufacturing but a considerable expansion of jobs in import/export, wholesale and retail trades, accommodation and food services. The increasing dominance of the service sector brings both new opportunities and risks for young workers in Hong Kong. While many services sectors are youth-friendly in terms of recruitment practices, young workers are confronted with more casual and precarious employment relations particularly in service and sales jobs in retail trades, accommodation and food services.

Although a large segment of the youth labour market is increasingly sensitive to employment instability, the distribution of employment risks in Hong Kong is far from universal but unequally distributed to the lower social class and to those with limited educational attainment (Tam and Ip, 2017). Therefore, the less privileged young workers suffer more from precarious employment and their earnings do not compensate for their employment risks. Without a history of secure employment and access to the organised

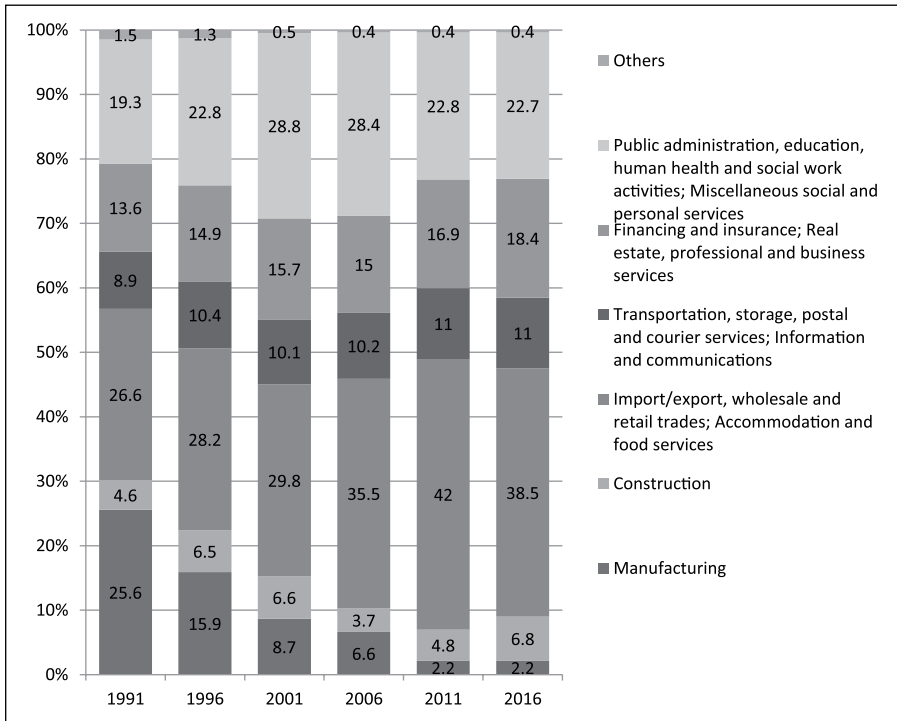


Figure 4. Changes over time in proportion of employed Hong Kong youth aged 15–24 years in various industries, 1991–2016.

Sources: Census and Statistics Department, Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (2002, 2008, 2013, 2018).

labour movement, the current forms and extent of labour flexibility are shaped by pro-business employment relations inherited from the colonial era in Hong Kong (Ng and Ip, 2011). The absence of institutionalised collective bargaining and political representation results in weak unionisation of labour and power asymmetries biased towards employers, in the workplace, labour market and policy-making process. Despite long-standing precariousness in Hong Kong, Chan (2016) contends that the nature of insecurity has shifted from transitional to permanent as the economy has been increasingly embedded in the global financial market, accompanied by frequently unpredictable crises. The implementation of the work-first approach to short-term employment services and training has neglected addressing employment precariousness experienced by young people in the labour market (Wong and Au-Yeung, 2018).

In a nutshell, Hong Kong’s current youth labour market is relatively blooming but becoming unevenly precarious. Given the extremely individualised employment relations and relatively favourable conditions for youth employment, the subjectivity of young precarious workers in Hong Kong would be different from in other social contexts undergoing severe youth unemployment. It is assumed that these young workers have relatively more choices of standard employment in Hong Kong and they would have

particular preferences and consideration of autonomy and precarity. The case of Hong Kong also adds value to the existing literature of youth precarious employment in terms of addressing the experiences of a non-Western society which is deprived of the tradition of collective bargaining.

Research design and methods

This research adopted a qualitative method to conduct in-depth and semi-structured interviews with the youth respondents with an emphasis placed on understanding their precarious work experiences and their perceptions on autonomy. Regarding the sampling method, it is argued that purposive sampling can effectively identify the relevant categories suggested by previous studies and develop a deeper understanding of the subject (Maxwell, 2013). Purposive sampling design is strategic for answering research questions, identifying appropriate interviewees with certain characteristics and maximising the diversity of cases for the study (Berg, 2009). Using such purposive sampling, 36 respondents were recruited according to four specific criteria at the time of interview: (1) gender – males versus females, (2) age – those who were at the age of 18–24 years versus those 25–29 years, (3) level of education – those who were at degree level or above versus those at or under sub-degree level and finally (4) nature of current employment – those with a fixed-term contract of full-time job longer than 60 days versus those who had a job without a formal contract, a part-time job with less than 30 hours per week or 6 hours per day, or a temporary job with a fixed-term contract less than 60 days. The respondents' profile ($N = 36$) is shown in Table 1.

Ethical clearance was approved before conducting the research study, and at the start of the interview, each anonymised respondent was given a brief introduction to the study and was assured that access to the interview content was strictly limited to the research team. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Initial data analysis was conducted via open coding and axial coding, in order to develop a set of themes for a thematic analysis. While the representativeness of the samples is not the main goal of qualitative research, variation of respondents' background was attempted for a better and wider understanding of the subject matter. All the verbatim quotes were translated into English with caution by the authors to preserve the original meanings in Cantonese.

Findings

This section is divided into two parts: the first of which is about mapping out four trajectories of precarious jobs, and the other is focused on examining the experience of precarious employment characterised by a mix of struggles and hopes.

Freedom-seeking and ambition in precarious work

The first pattern of respondents' aspiration is the expectation for freedom and the realisation of their dreams. This set of themes shows scepticism towards the goal of stability associated with so-called standard employment, as some respondents saw stability as an impediment to innovation and venturesome behaviour. While they were clear about the

Table 1. Respondents' profile.

| Sample size (N = 36) | Number |
|--|--------|
| Gender | |
| Male | 18 |
| Female | 18 |
| Educational attainment | |
| Degree level or above | 12 |
| At or under sub-degree level | 24 |
| Age (years) | |
| 18–24 | 18 |
| 25–29 | 18 |
| Distribution of respondents' occupations | |
| Accommodation, catering and food services worker | 5 |
| Artistic and fashion worker | 6 |
| Clerical and administrative worker | 6 |
| Crafted worker | 2 |
| Designers and media worker | 2 |
| Logistics driver | 1 |
| Financial investor | 1 |
| Flight attendant | 1 |
| Sales workers and promoter | 7 |
| Social service worker | 2 |
| Solicitor trainee | 1 |
| Teacher | 2 |

pros and cons of their precarious jobs, they seemingly opted to avoid reaching a state of stability. One respondent working in the creative industry expressed her scepticism towards pursuing a 'stable' career as follows:

At this stage, I would say 'over-stability' may not be good. Stability can bring up limitations to many alternatives, or even kill your creativity, as you will take everything for granted and stop further thinking. (Female, aged 25, art administrative assistant)

Another respondent outspokenly expressed his preference for doing precarious jobs in the field of his interest as a guitarist and as a part-time sales worker. He claimed that he enjoyed the process of choosing his own pathway of self-development and was ready to confront the fluctuations brought by his state of precarity. By working as a part-time toy salesperson, he could earn a living to support pursuing his dream in music and develop his interest in toys:

What is most vital is to take control of myself. It's brilliant to be self-directed It is the road taken by me! You have to expect for ups and downs when you make this choice. You have to give up the stability and I am not satisfied with a secure life Sometimes it is good to be confronted by challenges. It can be a process of learning and training, anyway. (Male, aged 24, private music teacher and toy salesperson)

These viewpoints echo the findings of relevant research studies about young workers' aspiration for a sense of autonomy and control in the creative and artistic industries sector (Morgan et al., 2013). What they disliked most was apparently the 'state of stability', which can imply a routine schedule and pattern as a working habit that would potentially induce inertia in creative workers. While this orientation does not necessarily reflect an entire rejection of income security, they seem to cherish more meaningful stimulation and in its pursuit are prepared to accommodate the inevitable volatility of their precarious jobs.

Paths: Departures from conventional life and employment pathways

The second theme mirrors a hostility and resistance to the mainstream paths of career development, given the long history of workaholic culture in Hong Kong. Despite its less common appeal, this view rethinking the meaning of life and work as a departure from traditions cannot be overlooked in the new generations:

I can't see the future. After the Umbrella Movement, many people will reflect, including me as well. I think the future life and social conditions are getting worse. Even the pay for a university graduate is unreasonable, given you can speak fluent English, Mandarin and being potent. The salary is an insult. If my future life is that difficult, without way out, it is good to think out of the box and go beyond the road previously paved. The life would be more meaningful to do whatever I like. (Male, aged 28, warehouse assistant)

In the eyes of this respondent, the social movement recently initiated by young people failed to bring about political reforms in Hong Kong, but it successfully propelled them to rethink the desirability of pursuing the mainstream life pattern. The perceived bleak future acted as a point of reference for bidding farewell to old practices and giving space for the younger generation to seek alternatives. On one hand, the existing conditions were unfavourable for labour in terms of both wages and working time; on the other hand, these situations were seen as likely to remain unchanged in view of frozen political and social reforms. Again, stability in this sense was taken by this respondent as a trap to lock up young people in their existing positions:

Stability in turn can be the chains locking you up. People can 'get on work' but can't 'get off work' in Hong Kong, as the working hours are too long. Doing stable jobs may mean your life is for work and there is no room to be 'unruly'. Most likely you can't find another secure job, so you have to stay at it. You will be shaped to this if you want stability. That's the trend. (Male, aged 28, warehouse assistant)

By means of unpacking employment stability and its politically conservative meanings, seeking an exit from conventional work–life practice can be seen as an individualised way out for the young people working in a social context characterised by the lack of unionised and collective bargaining power of labour.

A stepping stone for further travelling or studying

The third emerging theme generated from the data set is about adopting an instrumental perspective, assessing precarious jobs as a way of realising plans for travel or study. It

was quite common for the respondents to take short-term or part-time jobs to make some money without committing themselves to standard jobs:

Simply this year is to escape from doing any full-time job Working with this TV game company is happy and I plan to visit Europe for a month, although I know it is insecure. My family hopes for more maintenance, so I will find a full-time job later ... I want to do some playful things that I am interested in. (Female, aged 21, game promoter)

To make 'fast money' and take up an interesting job was considered by this respondent as a good choice in spite of the lack of job security. The job is not perceived as a source of security but as a means for pursuing adventurous or meaningful activities. With the popularity of working visa schemes, the respondent below took casual jobs as a viable means for making money while broadening her horizon and scope of experience:

At the moment, I allow myself to do what I like by saving some money and gaining experience. It's a time to prepare and equip myself before the journey. My goal is to travel around the world before 28 years old. So I may go for several months and come back to HK: doing casual jobs, saving and travelling again. (Female, aged 23, part-time job hopping from salesperson, to waitress staff, and then to promoter)

Such adventurous life plans drove young people into non-standard jobs where they do not tentatively strive for security and stability in their early career. However, their current preferences for precarious job did not negate young workers' future needs for a more secure employment.

Instability as the price of striving for long-term stability

The last theme on precarious employment is the planned transition from instability to stability in the later stage of young adulthood. Some respondents were concerned about their status after age 25 and hoped for increasing stability with their jobs or occupations. It was more acceptable for younger workers to (re)start a career with a long tenure and gain more experience when getting older:

I won't think anymore now, I mean changing fields. You know, I am reaching 26 years old. If you shift to a new sector, you need to start as a freshman. So I choose to toil at this job until I can get the license first. Once I get the license, I can change to another company within the sector. (Male, aged 25, maintenance technician)

Ironically, to obtain job promotion or pay rise in Hong Kong, some young workers have to frequently search for better jobs in the external labour market within the same sector of an occupation, instead of staying at the same company. Hence, it is of vital importance for these young workers to cope with insecurity in terms of changing jobs rather than occupations. Achieving a better level of fringe benefits and salary, attached to better posts, would be result only through winning the job competition:

I have to think about the future, as associate-degree is not enough and I may need further studies. A stable working time will be better. As I grow up, the medical benefits of the job may become a concern. The state of job instability should come to an end around aged 28 and by that time I hope I could manage to seek a more stable job. It is impossible to change the job just because of feeling boring with it. (Female, aged 25, job hunting now)

Some respondents, of course, did not anticipate lifelong instability and insecurity but there was nothing they could do to become more secure at the moment. In view of the lack of job prospects, young workers have to take risks in changing jobs and/or pay more for their education as a means to enhancing their careers. Consequently, they have to bear the costs of ongoing job mobility and insecurity in order to develop smooth upwards career movements. Yet there is no guarantee that today's precarity can be translated into tomorrow's security.

Structured dilemma between autonomy and precarity

Informed by the distinctions made by Campbell and Price (2016), the findings show that the precarity created by precarious work and the autonomy aspired to by precarious workers are in tension. Respondents' demands for autonomy are more about control over the workplace and working lives, and the trajectories of their life-course. Yet the realisation of these expectations is mediated by workers' needs for security and labour market conditions. Despite the fact that some youth respondents showed hesitation about enjoying routine-like job stability, they never completely ruled out the needs for income security. Therefore, their complex attitudes towards job stability and precarity should be unpacked and interpreted in relation to multiple layers of social context from the immediate family and peer environment to the macro social environment including the labour market. In this sense, it is unsurprising that the respondent below preferred a shorter rather than a longer contract:

Basically, the longer the contract lasts, the stronger the security. As my current salary is adjusted contract by contract, I have recently changed my mind. For my previous 'long-term' job, the pay rise was set rigidly at only 5%. It might be better to have a one-year contract as I may be able to negotiate a better salary increase on a yearly basis. (Male, aged 26, clerk in a construction materials company)

Against the backdrop of such a market-led bargaining structure, a longer employment contract offered to young workers could imply stronger job security, on one hand; yet, on the other hand, it might also mean a low salary increase or even salary immobility in spite of outstanding job performance. It was assumed that workers could gain an advantage in their individualised bargaining with employers by using the threat of exit in the context of adequate job opportunities, wages and information. Yet in the landscape of precarious employment, young workers have to take risks in bargaining for a better contract. This could partially explain why young precarious workers held ambivalent views on work security and labour flexibility, as their decision-making was circumscribed by the institutionalised labour market structure. Their job-searching and job-taking behaviour depends on contingent judgement of the current labour market conditions which

could change over time. In addition to the exogenous factors, endogenous pressures could also shape their perceptions of precarity and autonomy. It was evidenced that personal and family issues could specifically provoke young workers' appreciation of employment flexibility and their relative acceptance of precarity:

My company adopts a 'humanised' policy; everyone is self-disciplined. At one time, I had already used up my seven days of annual leave, but I had to visit my relatives in mainland China suddenly. I told my employer that I need a few more days of leave and I will take less leave next year ... It is a flexible arrangement and provides stronger security to me. So I am not sure whether a stable contract is good for me. (Female, aged 25, event organiser)

Autonomy in this sense could be reframed as the freedom of workers to decide their times of work and leave. In other words, precarious workers did expect more control over the work process at the workplace and greater bargaining power at the marketplace. Unfortunately, not every respondent was optimistic about the labour market and the future of their generation. One respondent felt helpless and just thought that there was nothing he could do in the face of the climate of precarity evident in his generation. Except for the privileged few such as civil servants, the widespread state of employment precariousness experienced by young workers was a structure imposed upon them:

Unless you are a civil servant, all sectors in Hong Kong suffer from precariousness. The younger generation is the group commonly laid off first. (Male, aged 29, trainee solicitor)

Accepting that labour market insecurity and job precarity were unavoidable and perhaps sometimes desirable did not imply the ignorance and short-sightedness of young workers but reflected how their perceptions of precarity and autonomy were shaped by the institutional context of the labour market, and by their own constraints and aspirations. Although some of the youth respondents chose to work at precarious jobs, they displayed diverse considerations and preparedness for employment precariousness. What is evident is that the risks and costs in fluctuated careers were increasingly individualised and transferred to younger workers. Such a phenomenon has raised questions about the danger of deepened insecurity and inequality in Hong Kong's youth labour market.

Discussion and concluding remarks

The four trajectories of young precarious workers and their structured dilemma between autonomy and precarity bring us back to the central question in relation to precarious work and precarious workers' subjectivity (Campbell and Price, 2016): What is the relationship between labour's autonomy and precarity? On one hand, the respondents generally aspired to greater freedom in their work and more exposure throughout their life course, for instance, travelling and staying in the creative industries rather than following a single and stable path of career development. Consequently, some of them risked facing income and job insecurity while pursuing greater control over both work and life. However, with a clear understanding of the costs brought by precarious work, some respondents prioritised and exercised such 'precarious autonomy' over security particularly when they perceived that they were still in their early phase of career development

over the entire life course. Precarious autonomy, therefore, is a product of the interplay between workers' aspirations for autonomy and employment precariousness.

On the other hand, some respondents gradually strove for greater security in their later career stages. Unless they could overcome income precarity in the future, these precarious workers may eventually prioritise security over their mastery of working lives and change jobs at the risk of losing autonomy. As a result, these workers sacrificed their freedom under the existing employment relations and suffered from 'autonomous precarity'. Young precarious workers' autonomy could be jeopardised in two ways. First, they leave the sectors and occupations that emphasise workers' autonomy but at high risk of employment precariousness, such as creative industries and cultural work. Second, the relative importance of autonomy to young workers is reduced with increasing ages. Although workers' autonomy does not necessarily vanish in the transition to later working life, the findings reveal that income and job security is more relevant to the consideration of young workers when they get older.

While this research echoes previous studies on young creative labour's acknowledgement of their job precarity (Armano and Murgia, 2013; Morgan et al., 2013), it adds value on the current literature by complicating the relationship between autonomy and precarity. Precarious autonomy is characterised by labour's desires for socio-political freedom in the workplace and everyday life, alongside the intensified exploitation in precarious employment relations; autonomous precarity embodies the relative loss of control over the working lives and the potential alienation appears in the less precarious work and industries. The analysis suggests that the investigation of precarious work and workers can not only focus on incomes and contracts in the economic sense, but also pay attention to the political dimension in precarious employment, for instance, workers' bounded choices and materialised power. This goes beyond the implicit dichotomy between determinism and voluntarism in the field of precarious employment studies.

It is argued that neoliberalism and age play different roles in shaping autonomy-precarity politics. First, the neoliberalisation of the labour market worsens precarious workers' economic insecurity and withers their socio-political autonomy, while it enhances employers' and corporate flexibility and freedom. This process is amplified in Hong Kong's neoliberal-authoritarian regime and the lack of political and economic democracy, given that labour's collective voices for policy-making and unions' involvement at the workplace is institutionally excluded. Therefore, the ostensible trade-off between autonomy and security should be situated in Hong Kong's neoliberal context where labour's structural power against capital is limited. Second, young people are junior workers who are more likely subject to work precarity than senior workers due to the former's weaker unionisation and bargaining power (Hodder et al., 2018). Meanwhile, young workers also demonstrate greater acceptance of work instability at the early-career stage. Therefore, it is assumed that young people are more vulnerable to precarity but more attentive to autonomy. As young people's negative employment experiences could affect later working lives because of scarring effects (Mojsoska-Blazevski et al., 2017), their pursuit of autonomy and resultant precarity should receive more attention.

Finally, the findings call for a more autonomy-sensitive and age-focused labour market and social policy that acknowledges the aspirations and struggles of young workers at particular stage of the life-course and does not take standard employment for granted

as the optimal starting point of youth career paths. For income maintenance policies, it is suggested that the government and society should consider post-productivist policies that encourage more freedom in work and life with less reliance on conventional standard employment (Weeks, 2011). For instance, the unconditional basic income could be among necessary but not sufficient proposals for precarious workers who aspired for more autonomy and security (de Peuter and Cohen, 2015; Gorz, 1999; Standing, 2011). Regarding employment protection, the government should pay more attention to the redistribution of employment risks and take the interrupted career path seriously by introducing more and better protection and compensation for non-standard employment options. Therefore, the scarring effects of precarious employment on later working life can be minimised by means of policy interventions as far as possible.

It is argued that young workers' expectations for employment and training are shaped by changing normative beliefs and the generational construction of career and life development, for instance, overseas exposure, working holiday and lifelong education (McDonald et al., 2011). Youth precarious employment not only reflects the changes of life-course trajectories and the resultant precarity but also calls for new strategies to organise young precarious workers. How to recognise workers' heterogeneous preferences for autonomy and security in relation to the pursuit of collective emancipation would warrant further research studies.

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