



Cumberland Lodge

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Working Identities

11 - 12 March 2019

Conference Briefing



**Identities
& belonging**
2018-19 series

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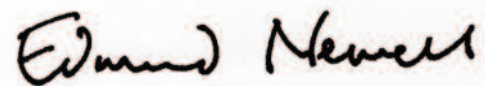
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This briefing document has been produced to help participants prepare for the forthcoming Cumberland Conference on 'Working Identities'. The conference will bring together union representatives, working rights campaigners, academics, non-governmental organisations, policymakers and practitioners, to discuss developments that are changing the role and significance of work in people's lives and wider society, on 11-12 March 2019,

We are extremely grateful to our Research Associate, Dr Eva Selenko, for preparing this resource for us.

I hope you find it helpful, and I look forward to seeing you at the conference.



Canon Dr Edmund Newell
Principal
Cumberland Lodge

about the author



This Conference Briefing was prepared by Dr Eva Selenko, who has been commissioned to support our work on 'Working Identities', on a freelance basis, as part of our 2018-19 annual series of conferences and events on '**Identities & Belonging**'.

A psychologist by background, Eva is a Senior Lecturer in Work Psychology at Loughborough University, where her research focuses on the interplay between work and people's identity. Prior to joining Loughborough, Eva was a lecturer at the Institute of Work Psychology at the University of Sheffield, and at the University of Linz, Austria. She completed her doctorate at the University of Graz, Austria, having completed an MSc at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, and she also spent time as a visiting researcher at Griffith University, Australia. Eva has published widely and she is also associate editor for the oldest work psychological journal, *Applied Psychology: An International Review*. To find out more about Eva's work and areas of interest, please visit cumberlandlodge.ac.uk/about-us/people/dr-eva-selenko.

In addition to this Briefing, Eva will be actively participating in the conference conversations on 11-12 March, to draw out key learning points and recommendations. She will be summarising these, in consultation with a representative delegation of experts and practitioners, into a cross-sector Policy Report. This report will be shared with our conference delegates and other interested parties, as well as with the wider public via our website. It will also be presented to parliamentarians and policymakers in Westminster, with a view to informing and influencing policy development. Find out more about this process at cumberlandlodge.ac.uk/about-us/our-method.

Cumberland Lodge is a charity that empowers people, through dialogue and debate, to tackle the causes and effects of social division. Find out more at cumberlandlodge.ac.uk.

executive summary	
1. a brief introduction to identity	page 1
2. the working classes	page 3
2.1 the situation	page 3
2.2 changes in work and employment	page 3
2.3 changes in worker participation	page 4
2.4 changes in communities	page 4
2.5 nostalgia as a method of dealing with identity loss?	page 5
2.6 on the disappearance of strong working class identities	page 6
3. young people and precarious work	page 7
3.1 the situation	page 7
3.2 impact on identity	page 8
3.3 challenges of identity development	page 9
4. digital revolutions	page 11
4.1 what does the future of work hold for workers?	page 11
4.2 impacts on workplaces	page 11
4.3 replacing human beings and changes in work tasks	page 12
4.4 less routine but more creativity	page 12
4.5 robots as colleagues?	page 12
4.6 how people cope with technology change	page 13
4.7 digital platform work – changes in identity	page 13
5. 'bullshit jobs'	page 15
5.1 meaninglessness and boredom	page 15
5.2 falseness	page 16
5.3 entrapment, tension and powerlessness	page 17
5.4 the consequences of purposelessness, falseness, entrapment	page 17
6. unemployment and worklessness	page 19
6.1 on the experience of unemployment and worklessness	page 19
6.2 impact on identity	page 20
6.3 what can be done?	page 21
7. conclusion	page 23
endnotes	page 24

executive summary

Work is an important part of identity and how people see themselves. Working identity or knowing who you are (in relation to work), helps people to know what to expect, how to behave and what to strive for in the future. It creates order and meaning in the social environment and helps with orientation. However, working identity does not develop independently of the social environment; rather, it continuously evolves, changes and adapts to the environment. Sometimes, the influences of the social environment can be rather disruptive, and this is when identity threat, discontinuity or confusion can follow.

This Briefing provides an exploration of current thinking and research around working identities, to inform the Cumberland Lodge 'Working Identities' conference taking place in March 2019. It offers an analysis of current labour situations in relation to the effects they can have on identities and belonging.

In the chapter on the working classes, themes such as identity disruption, loss of belongingness and nostalgia are discussed. This is followed by an analysis of young people and 'precarious work', and how the challenges of finding stable work influence personal identity and future career development. The section on digitalisation outlines the effect of computerisation on work tasks and employment situations, and ways in which occupational identities can be crafted around these workplace realities. The ensuing exploration of 'bullshit jobs' and the experience of meaninglessness, falseness and entrapment in certain types of work is approached in relation to research on meaning-making and identity, and theories about how the aggression that sometimes results from these feelings relates to the frustration of positive identity enactment. Finally, the Briefing summarises the excluding and stigmatising impacts of unemployment and worklessness on people's working identities.

All of these themes are disruptive forces for identity. They can motivate people to re-assess who they are and how they belong, but they also pose risks for positive self-understanding. Given the wide-ranging, potentially negative consequences that disrupted identity can bring, it is important to have a clear and interdisciplinary understanding of the phenomenon before seeking to devise strategies to address it. Hopefully this Briefing offers a first step in that direction and sets the tone for the conference to come.

This Conference Briefing highlights the following key points for discussion:

- Working identities (which can be defined as peoples' understandings of who they are, in relation to work) are both informed by, and inform, the social environment in which work takes place.
- People need to enact their identities in positive encounters with others, in order to feel validated and confirmed in those identities.
- New labour realities can pose particular challenges for people's working identities:
 - They can provoke identity discontinuity/disruption, where people no longer feel able to enact the work identities they want to (e.g. because of unemployment, sectoral changes, technological changes to the existing job, or feelings of enforced 'falseness')
 - They can give rise to feelings of identity confusion, particularly when jobs fail to offer the necessary structures to allow for identity development.
 - They can limit peoples' opportunities for positive social validation (e.g. because work is less visible, or the work/non-work situation is stigmatised).
- New labour realities also make identity particularly salient to people. Workers want to understand what is happening to them, and to integrate this understanding into their own self-understanding. These labour realities can be perceived as 'sense-breaking', 'meaningless' or 'excluding' – all of which can be motivating factors in identity formation.
- When confronted with these new labour realities, certain coping behaviours are observed amongst workers that can be ascribed to impacts on identity:
 - Nostalgia might be adopted as a strategy for dealing with disrupted identity
 - Frustrated identity enactment might lead to aggression.
 - Occupational identity change might be observed, but only with certain preconditions.
- It seems that giving people opportunities to enact new and more positive identities, or to experience greater social validation, can help them to navigate the choppy waters of 21st-century labour realities.

I. a brief introduction to identity

Work is an essential part of who we are, and identity lies at the heart of the way we face the world. Our identity shapes our emotional responses to other people, influences our goals and behaviours, and has been found to affect our health.¹ It is not fixed, but rather it is informed by the social environment and situational circumstances.

Identity is the subject of many disciplines, but this analysis focuses on the way people understand themselves. Rather than discussing different types of identities or the components thereof, it centres on perceived identity. Within this context, identity can be summed up as the answer to the question, 'Who are you?'

This self-referential element of identity is crucial. By knowing who we aspire to be, we identify our motivations and ambitions, shape our understanding of events, and learn how to orientate ourselves in a new environment.² Our sense of identity, within a social psychology framework, offers guidance and orientation whenever we are faced with an unknown environment or change. Identities indicate what we can do, how we should behave, what we can expect from the world, where we have come from, and where our potential lies.

In industrialised societies, anticipated answers to the question 'Who are you?' often relate to an individual's work. Answers often indicate an occupation ('I am a psychologist'), an organisational role ('I am a key account manager'), an organisation ('I work for a large corporation'), or indeed, anything relating to the past ('I was a steel worker') or future ('I am training to become a researcher').

Work identifies us; it locates us in relation to others. This is a commonplace tool that signals to others the level of our education, our socio-economic background and our reputation.¹ Identity, in other words, emerges dynamically in relation to the physical and social environment, of which the workplace is a key factor.

Defining oneself through work, however, becomes increasingly difficult in times of precarious employment, or in relation to progressively meaningless work or digital platform work. Rooting identity within work becomes more challenging when purposeful employment is hard to come by. If work is under threat from digitalisation, unemployment or mechanisation, does this translate automatically into a threat to our identities? If jobs are difficult to secure, and they require a high degree of flexibility and lack stimulation, then how can we develop positive identities around them?

This Conference Briefing explores a range of pertinent themes in relation to working identities, to inform the upcoming Cumberland Lodge conference on 'Working Identities'.

- The working classes
- 'Precarious' work and young people
- Digital revolutions
- 'Bullshit jobs'
- Unemployment and worklessness.

¹ We are, of course, also 'more' than just our work. We might be parents, children, carers, people with certain interests, locals, nationals, Europeans, and many other categories besides. Given that we spend most of our adult waking time at work or working, however, work-related identities are a particularly important component of our identity.

On each of these themes, there is an outline of the relevant social environment of work, followed by a discussion of how this environment might affect identity.

Changing work environments can affect our identities as working people in multiple ways: they can disrupt our identities and undermine the way we understand ourselves; they can induce uncertainty, which can motivate the re-crafting of our identities and the pursuit of security; they can modify social contexts and change our sense of belonging; and they can also affect our sense of meaning and limit our feelings of self-control, thereby motivating us to rethink who we are and what we value.

The identity challenges posed by today's working environments lead to two important questions:

- What can we do about them?
- Should we be concerned?

2. the working classes

2.1 the situation

Working life has changed fundamentally over the course of the 20th century. After a long period of economic growth and public wealth accumulation, from the 1970s onwards, working class people (and indeed all working people) have experienced a shift in employment, accompanied by a change in political understanding and public thinking around work.

During this period, manual labour, production and agricultural jobs declined in most Western countries (and grew elsewhere), alongside an expansion of service-oriented, managerial, clerical and sales jobs.³ Thus, a significant shift in sectoral employment took place. However, whilst coal mines and steelworks closed, for example, those jobs were not necessarily replaced by service-based employment in the same locations. Where replacement did occur, it did not necessarily result in higher quality, more stable, secure and meaningful employment. Instead, the 20th century saw the rise of a new class of workers, often referred to as the 'precariat'.⁴

This sectoral shift took place alongside changes in policymaking and public thinking about the world of work, working-class life and individual skills in general.⁵ For example, whilst the older world of work valued qualities such as durability and a long-termist orientation, the jobs resulting from sectoral change favoured qualities such as flexibility, adaptability and a short-term orientation.⁶ In more liberal market economies, unions saw their political influence decline, and many public services were privatised. Workplaces and organisations also became more international – not only in their production and supply chains, but also in their management systems.⁷ In Britain, this took place across communities and cities that used to rely on jobs in production. These interconnected developments and trends – social, political, cultural and technological – form the backdrop against which the identities and types of self-understanding of working people develop and transform.

To highlight the pertinent effects on identity, this analysis focuses on the changes affecting the working classes in three key areas:

- Changes in the nature of work
- Changes in the systems of worker participation
- Changes in the social contexts or community life.

Working identity is informed by enactment – performing one's identity – as well as by social context. When work and social contexts change, identity will be affected as well.

2.2 changes in work and employment

The nature of jobs has changed. Semi-skilled manual labour jobs in the early- and mid-20th century, such as those of steel workers or miners, often entailed serious health risks. Risk is connected to the development of a more robust sense of shared or group identity, as it creates a strong bond with work colleagues. Not only do these workers have a mutual understanding of their 'shared toil', but they often literally depend on each other for survival. This continues to be the case in some 'hero' professions today (e.g. fire fighter or soldier). In addition, situations that bear risks, challenge an individual or hold a high potential for failure, have strong effects on learning and identity.⁸ These two elements – co-dependency within the job environment and risk awareness – are robust predictors of strong collective work identities.

Aside from the nature of jobs, employment contracts also changed. During the late-20th century, there was a move towards more precarious, less secure and more flexible work, leading to the growth of the working poor and an increase in the number of people in need of multiple jobs.⁹ Such uncertain and highly flexible employment situations are not conducive to a strong sense of community and identity. People simply have too few opportunities to develop a shared identity with others, and to get recognition and social validation from their colleagues in such a rapidly changing and competitive workplace.

The disappearance of industry sectors that provided a positively regarded social identity (i.e. steel worker or coal miner) has reduced the availability of meaningful employment and the shared identities that connect colleagues into a socially distinct group rooted in sameness and solidarity.

The disappearance of industry sectors that provided a positively regarded social identity (i.e. steel worker or coal miner) has reduced the availability of meaningful employment and the shared identities that connect colleagues into a socially distinct group rooted in sameness and solidarity. Insecure service sector jobs and other precarious forms of work fail to provide these kinds of positively evaluated, work-based identities. Professional identities, roles and work arrangements from previous decades no longer offer viable identities in the present context. From a psychological perspective, this can generate a situation of identity discontinuity and status loss, i.e. of finding oneself in a more precarious position. This has been found to have harmful physiological effects, as well as negative impacts on wellbeing.¹⁰¹¹

2.3 changes in worker participation

Identity does not refer simply to self-definition, but also requires enactment. Opportunities for worker participation have transformed over the 20th century. Service jobs tend to be less unionised than the manual labour employment that went before, and this affects the avenues available for individual and collective worker participation. Under Margaret Thatcher's government in the 1980s, legislation was passed to curb the influence of unions. Public discourse around worker participation also changed during this period, towards workers having more of an individual voice, with an emphasis on personalised, employer-employee partnerships.¹² The previous monopoly of unions as the main channel of influence was undermined. This process, in turn, also eroded the political power and social relevance of the unions. Furthermore, management trends such as quality circles or Japanese management (which includes, for example, decision-making by consensus) introduced alternative models for worker participation, which further challenged the traditional, unionised model of work in Britain.¹³

2.4 changes in communities

Social identification takes place when people interact with each other, and especially so wherever groups share socio-economic backgrounds, professions or living spaces. Local communities in the UK are, traditionally, closely aligned with the industry sectors that drove the development of specific towns or cities. Today, certain places are still known for the particular products they once produced, even though the industry that originally shaped their reputations is long gone. For example, Sheffield is still referred to as the 'steel city'.¹⁴ With industrial decline, many such towns and cities lost a core part of their employment base, as well as a community-defining element. At the same time, publicly funded, working community

institutions – such as the high-quality social housing, educational facilities or cultural organisations that all contributed to the development of collective identities – were also dismantled. What remains of intensive manual work is now increasingly carried out by foreign labourers, leading to more diversified local populations.

Council spending cuts over the years (an estimated 30 per cent between 2010 and 2019, inflation adjusted¹⁵) affect those who are most reliant on social support. As a consequence, community-building programmes have declined. This development not only increases precarity and poverty, but it also undermines opportunities to create and validate a sense of shared identity. This can affect people's sense of belonging – another important reason why they seek out a common identity in the first place, because in order to experience belonging, people strive to identify with coherent social groups.¹⁶ In a context in which working identities are already disrupted, a loss of other community-building institutions can exacerbate the sense of identity loss or threat.

2.5 nostalgia as a method of dealing with identity loss?

In attempting to cope with the effects of identity discontinuity or identity loss as the result of changing work conditions or unemployment, nostalgic reflections on the past can appear to be a promising avenue. Nostalgia is commonly defined as 'sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past'.¹⁷ It not only creates an emotionally warm or cosy sensation, based on positively enhanced memories, but it also fulfils important identity functions.

Nostalgia enables an understanding of present identity against the backdrop of who we used to be. For example, some people in the northeast of England still refer to themselves and their towns as 'mining communities', despite the mines having been closed for many years. Nostalgia creates a connection between contemporary identity and the past, by eliciting positive emotions as well as memories of belonging and connectedness. These emotional experiences can be invoked to contrast an experience of loneliness and a lack of solidarity with a more positive recollection of past experience.¹⁸

However, nostalgia is risky. It can refocus the mind solely on things that have been lost. Nostalgic notions of identity continuity can also undermine willingness to embrace new opportunities. Romantically enhanced ideas of the past can also create barriers between people with different histories, such as long-term residents and recent immigrants to a town or region. The fixed identity that is maintained by nostalgia often does not allow for divergent histories or more inclusive types of belonging.¹⁹

Another way of coping with identity loss and discontinuity is to shift the focus of one's identity. This might include focusing on a broader identity category. For example, whilst some people no longer refer to themselves as 'miners', they may still identify as 'working class' – even if they have changed profession. That self-identification as 'working class' can provide a kind of identity continuity that is required for a healthy and happy, community life.

Finally, a loss of belonging might motivate people to seek out either new sources of social identity and forms of collective belonging, or to strengthen bonds with existing groups. The main obstacle to finding new groups for positive identification is that it takes time. In a community context, in which social opportunities (e.g. cultural activities, shared housing, free educational facilities, social centres, youth clubs) are diminished by cuts in public spending, this can be increasingly difficult. In such a scenario, nostalgia may indeed resurface as the most viable route for identity preservation.

2.6 on the disappearance of strong working class identities

So, have traditional sources of working class identity disappeared? It is true that entire industry sectors and job families have disappeared. The circumstances of work, within which identities and a sense of self are formed, have also changed. There are fewer institutional, social and work-related anchors for shared community life. As a consequence, there are fewer social contexts that enable a positive self-validation amongst people in working class jobs today.

At the very least, the meaning of what it means to be 'working class' has changed. It includes a broader demographic of people – as there are more women, age groups, religious backgrounds and ethnic or racial identities in the workplace today. The working

classes also include more types of jobs across a wider range of sectors. To the degree that these new labour realities enable a shared sense of belonging and allow for self-enhancement, and as long as identifying with working colleagues in these new contexts helps individuals to cope with uncertainty whilst providing meaning and control in their lives, new forms of labour can nevertheless promote relevant and meaningful forms of identity.

Self-identification as being 'working class' is still popular. It has a political connotation; it signals a particular social stance and awareness of social contexts. For example, when prompted, 60 per cent of Britons self-identify as working class, even if university educated and financially well off.²⁰ Whether this reflects nostalgia, or is an attempt to signal belonging to the wider community, is unclear.

Percentage of Britons
who self-identify as
'working class'



60%

3. young people and precarious work

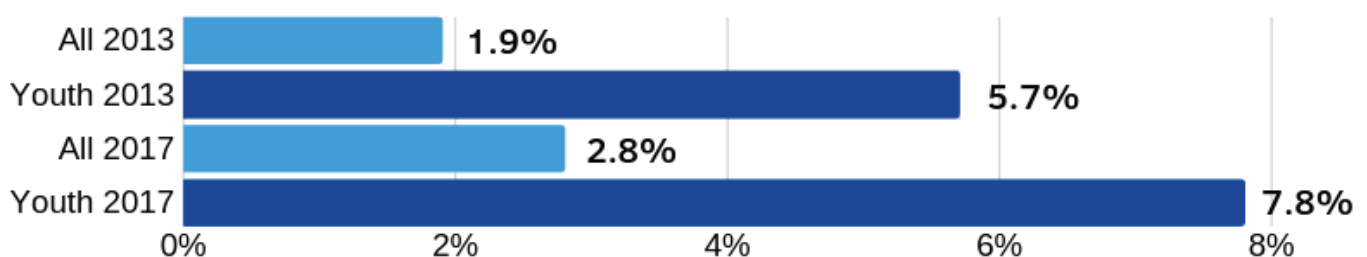
‘If stable careers provide individuals with the continuity and predictability needed to self-reflexively understand who they are, how can individuals form a meaningful identity in a tumultuous world characterized by constant change and ambiguous, risky, boundaryless careers?’

(Budd, 2011)

3.1 the situation

Starting out in a career has never been easy, but it seems particularly difficult today. Precarious work is commonly defined as ‘employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker’.²¹ According to recent statistics, young people (aged 18–24) in the UK are generally more likely to have zero-hour contracts and temporary or part-time jobs than any other age group.²² They are not alone in that. Young people throughout the EU are disproportionately employed in temporary and uncertain jobs.²³ Some pundits suggest that this should be considered a normal experience when joining the labour market, due to probationary periods, training or other early-career factors.

It appears, however, as if the situation is gradually deteriorating. The proportion of young people on zero-hour contracts and in part-time or badly-paid jobs is also rising – and rising more quickly than in other age groups. For example, whilst the number of all people in zero-hour jobs rose between 2013 and 2017 (from 1.9 per cent to 2.8 per cent in the general working population; a 68 per cent increase) the number of young people in such forms of employment rose more steeply still (from 5.7 per cent of young people to 7.8 per cent; a 73 per cent increase).²⁴ A similar trend can be observed for young people in part-time and temporary jobs. Temporary, part-time and zero-hour jobs entail low wages. The percentage of young people earning at or below the minimum wage level has risen between 2008 and 2018.²⁵



Percentage increase of all workers vs youth workers in 2013 and 2017

This increase in precarity cannot be explained by having more young people in work in that age band. On the contrary, it is the percentage of young people in higher education that has been increasing since 2006,²⁶ whilst the number of young people in employment has been either stable or decreased. Neither can the increase be explained by a change of preferences or choices: when asked, young people mostly indicated that they ended up in their temporary jobs involuntarily.²⁷

Even amongst recent graduates, the percentage of people working in non-graduate level jobs (jobs that do not require a university degree) is on the rise.²⁸ Some 27 per cent of graduates even end up working unpaid

internships²⁹ – probably catering to the popular belief that ‘work experience is always viewed favourably by employers’.³⁰

In short, the numbers strongly suggest that if someone is between 18 and 24 years old and working today, the chances that they find themselves in a precarious, badly paid and temporary job are greater than they were ten years ago. If that person is a graduate, they are more likely to find themselves in unpaid internships or non-graduate job roles. This trend is a cause for concern.

3.2 impact on identity

Working in precarious, temporary, unstable and badly-paid jobs will always have a negative impact on one’s professional identity. However, this can be particularly disconcerting for those with less well-established professional identities, who perhaps lack a clear understanding of who they are professionally and of the work opportunities or career paths – and thus work futures – to which they can aspire.

Young people just entering the labour market are at a transition point in their lives.³¹ They are encountering new contexts and new demands, and need to learn new behaviours quickly. These newly-acquired skills, knowledge and experiences must be integrated into a meaningful structure, a ‘self narrative’, in order to be remembered and be drawn upon as a resource and reference point for future behaviour. Thus, entering the labour market often involves a fundamental change in how young people view the world and their place in it, and in how they reflect on their behaviours and relationships with others.

New job incumbents often encounter mismatches between their sense of self and their day-to-day work experience.³² This can include the experience of failure, with its impact on identity construction through experiences of ‘sense breaking’ and learning.³³ A longitudinal study amongst junior doctors revealed that this mismatch between everyday job experiences and a professional self-image entailed a process of identity customisation. During this process, junior doctors learned to creatively combine different identities to enable a positive overall view of themselves, or to develop a more nuanced understanding of their profession that also allowed for the possibility of failure.³⁴ These processes of identity customisation also are likely to be experienced in other professions, where there is a mismatch between professional self-image and initial job experience.

There are certain contextual factors that influence the identity adaptation process, and the learning situation has to contain a certain level of predictability. Without even minimum predictability, a person will have difficulties in drawing inferences and learning general rules of behaviour. Second, regular feedback and the opportunity to learn about one’s own identity are also important. This can take the form of simply knowing the results of one’s actions and understanding cause and effect. Third, the learning situation has to contain the opportunity to perform or enact one’s identity, in a social context. Without social validation, there is little chance of a newly-learned identity taking root. Finally, there needs to be a psychologically safe space that provides the resources necessary to reflect on the experience and to learn from it.³⁵

It is easy to see why precarious, underpaid or temporary jobs offer fewer opportunities for identity learning and formation. Working in an unstable environment (i.e. a zero-hour job), will offer fewer chances for repeat-learning, the building of social relationships that could recognise and verify new forms identity, and for learning from role-models. Similarly, underemployment will not offer the opportunity to apply and test learned knowledge in order to broaden experience. Precarious work also disconfirms the occupational identity that a person might have acquired whilst training for a certain profession.

The issue of not getting paid or getting paid too little might further augment these effects. Salary is still a

very salient measure of status in our society. Not getting paid for professional work signals a devaluation of one's own skills: they are 'worth nothing'. This devaluation in the eyes of one's peers and oneself is further exacerbated by financial difficulties.

Over time, people are likely to adapt to a precarious job situation, identity-wise. Research on individuals engaged in so-called 'dirty work' (e.g. gravediggers) shows that by selective social comparisons and reframing, people manage to achieve a positive identity.³⁶ The question is whether precarious, unstable and low-paid employment can allow for these positive comparisons as well.

Taken together, it is very likely that precarious work will undermine and hinder professional identity development amongst new job incumbents. This is not only an uncomfortable situation for a young person's self-understanding, but it will also affect the chances of developing a satisfying working identity in the future.

3.3 challenges of identity development

There is growing evidence about the effects of positive work-based identities on proactive career behaviours³⁷ and the pursuit of career goals.³⁸ Having certainty about one's identity has been found to affect future careers choices, too. A person with an insufficiently developed occupational or work-related identity will not only find it more difficult to draw meaning from work-related events, but will also have greater difficulty in directing future career behaviours.

Without knowing who one is and where one belongs professionally, it is more difficult to develop clear aspirations, to plan for the future and to select between different career paths.³⁹ Furthermore, the experience of setbacks can affect the aspirational future self. For example, failing to get a graduate-level job might trigger a possible future self of 'professional failure'⁴⁰, whilst working multiple (zero-hour) jobs might lead to the activation of an identity as a 'jack of all trades'. These setbacks might contribute to painting a bleak future identity.

This negative picture of a future self can undermine career goal setting, which is essential for a successful career. Effective goal setting requires a combination of self-knowledge about strengths and skills preferences on the one side, and specific and realistic knowledge about aspirations and goals on the other.⁴¹ Young people in precarious jobs are less likely to develop realistic goal setting capacities if their understanding of who they are and who they could be is underdeveloped.

Without the support and backing of a strong social network, which could offer alternative contexts for self-validating a positive professional identity, young people not only have fewer resources to take risks and encounter useful career opportunities, but they might also fail to develop a satisfying and positive, career-based identity.

As a result of insufficient professional identity development, young people in precarious employment find it more difficult to leave those jobs and develop satisfying careers. Without the support and backing of a strong social network, which could offer alternative contexts for self-validating a positive professional identity, young people not only have fewer resources to take risks and encounter useful career opportunities, but they might also fail to develop a satisfying and positive, career-based identity. Indeed, there is evidence that young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are encouraged by parents

to aim lower, both educationally and occupationally.⁴² They internalise expectations and resign themselves to the fact that they do not have the ability, resources or motivation to achieve occupational success.⁴³ They place less importance on, and express less interest in, work, have fewer mature career identities, are less adaptable, have fewer clear career goals, engage in fewer career goal-pursuit activities, and expect more barriers to career-goal achievement.⁴⁴⁴⁵

If the number of young people in precarious jobs is indeed growing, then this is an area of concern. Not only is it dissatisfying for those concerned, but society as a whole is affected by the waste of people's potential and abilities. Ideally, young people would not end up in precarious employment in the first place. When they do, however, it is important that social structures offer them exit opportunities.

There might be a silver lining to this misery – as revealed in research on multiple job holders. The few who eventually accommodate their (often) contrasting professional selves within one coherent narrative, can benefit from an enriched and more complex identity than their peers. Instead of turning into a 'jack of all trades', people working in different jobs at the same time become 'multi potentialities'.⁴⁶ Knowing who one is and being able to draw on multiple selves and identities can be helpful in the fast-paced and fast-changing work environment of today, and in the training of the adaptive leaders of tomorrow.

4. digital revolutions

4.1 what does the future of work hold for workers?

There is no doubt that the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ will bring substantive changes to the how, where and when we work – and what this work looks like. This has already been happening, as the rise of digital platform work testifies. We are witnessing exciting times: according to the World Economic Forum, 65 per cent of today’s primary school children will work in jobs that do not yet even exist and that we cannot even anticipate.⁴⁷ Not only will there be entirely new jobs, but existing ones will be replaced and changed as well. If the cost of computing continues to sink, as the calculating powers of computers rise, there will be an increasingly strong economic incentive for employers to replace workers with digital processing.⁴⁸ Current efforts in machine learning are explicitly dedicated to finding ways of replacing cognitive tasks with algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI). Similarly, developments in mobile robotics are allowing for a progressive replacement of manual tasks. In particular, routine cognitive and manual work seem to be prone to replacement, since explicit rules can generally be specified for them; but non-routine tasks are also slowly being affected, as seen in the rapid developments in self-driving car technology.⁴⁹

There are manifold examples of ways in which AI processes are starting to reshape cognitive jobs. In healthcare, diagnostic tasks are rapidly being computerised. For example, oncologists at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center are using IBM’s Watson computer to mill the medical reports of over a million patients, in addition to scientific data and clinical trials, in order to reach an individualised diagnosis that takes into account patients’ individual symptoms and medical histories.⁵⁰ At the Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, text recognition software is used to scan thousands of patient comments from various channels, every month.⁵¹ In legal and financial service industries, algorithms are increasingly used for text analysis and to sort large number of documents in a short time. Fraud detection is now almost completely computerised, as it relies on the ability to detect trends in big data.⁵² It is now generally agreed that algorithms are superior to human brainpower when it comes to combining large quantities of information, making AI decision-making superior to flesh-and-bone workers, at least in that regard.

4.2 impacts on workplaces

As fascinating as these examples are, they also indicate that human workers will increasingly become replaceable, as they are substituted by more efficient machines, and that in turn will also affect the nature of work and the wider employment context.

In order to get a better understanding of the number of occupations that could be at risk of being replaced by automated and computer-controlled processes, researchers⁵³ evaluated 702 existing jobs (based on job descriptions generated from the occupational database, O*Net) with the use of parameters such as required levels of perception, manipulation, creativity, and social intelligence. According to their estimate, up to 47 per cent of all existing jobs are under threat of replacement by computerisation in the coming years. This particularly concerns jobs with limited social intelligence and creativity requirements, as well as jobs that are conducted in highly structured environments. A recently published report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) comes to less dramatic, but still concerning, conclusions. According to the OECD, 14 per cent of all jobs are at high risk of automation, and another 32 per cent are at risk of undergoing substantial change.⁵⁴

These examples illustrate that the nature of many jobs will change quite dramatically, as AI and machine learning, as well as robots, become regular partners in our working lives. The nature of employment will also change, as jobs are increasingly done outside of traditional, organisational structures; for example, on

digital platforms. Each of these factors will affect workers, their workplace environments and their identities, in different ways.

4.3 replacing human beings and changes in work tasks

In the simplest scenario, there will be fewer people producing the same kinds of services. Regardless of the speed at which worker displacement takes place (through sudden restructuring or a slower process of transformation), this will result in feelings of insecurity amongst remaining workers – insecurity about future employment and the nature of their jobs and tasks.

Job insecurity has been found to have a profound effect on peoples' working identities, since the anticipation of unemployment undermines the confident self-definition that comes from being a member of a profession or an occupation, or simply from being employed.⁵⁵ If fewer people are needed to carry out the same tasks, certain workplaces could become lonely spaces to work. If experts are reduced to overseeing and correcting robots, rather than carrying out tasks themselves, occupational identities will need to be re-crafted. For workers who witness these changes within their working lives, similar processes of identity-discontinuity might be observed to those experienced by the industrial labourers of the past.

4.4 less routine but more creativity

Workers in organisations that make extensive use of computerisation would be required predominantly for tasks requiring creativity or social intelligence (i.e. human-to-human interaction), or for recovering failures and correcting errors when robots and automated processes fail. More generally, jobs and occupations will change as they are stripped of their more routine, computerisable elements. For example, in an office job there will be less time required for crafting well-worded texts or well-designed communications, as AI will be able to do these tasks. Both of these scenarios have specific effects and consequences on identity.

Computerised processes exceed the capacity of human decision-making in routine tasks. Nevertheless, routine tasks fulfil important functions to the human worker: they allow for a verification of skills and identity; and offer a sense of stability and continuity. In an environment without organisational routines, workers need to continuously redevelop habits, formulate new strategies and make behavioural and psychological adaptations. Without the establishment of routine processes that are embedded in structured environments, expertise will be more difficult to achieve.⁵⁶ It will become more challenging to attain a positive occupational self-understanding in this environment.⁵⁷

4.5 robots as colleagues?

The experience of working alongside robots will also affect identity. There is evidence to suggest that robots actually can be perceived as colleagues in a working group – as in-group members.⁵⁸ When robots share certain characteristics with human members of the working group, such as a local group name or a shared work location, they are rated more favourable and perceived as being more humanoid than robots that lack those familiar characteristics. This indicates that workgroup identities could be widened to include non-humanoids under certain circumstances.

Other research shows that the look of a robot (machine-like or humanoid) plays a role in the acceptance of robots in the workplace, in terms of whether they are a subordinate or a superior, and whether they are perceived as an obstacle or a source of support.⁵⁹ In general, the extent to which human workers perceive their robot colleagues to be useful helpers, or a nuisance and obstacle, influences the acceptance of those robots as colleagues.

4.6 how people cope with technology change

In predicting how increased computerisation will affect identities, it is helpful to learn from professions that have already undergone significant technological and related occupational changes. Research shows that experiencing technological change can lead to identity disruption and a sense of having one's skills and competence challenged.⁶⁰ Occupational identity influences how technology is interpreted: if it is seen to be replacing a core aspect of that identity, then technological change is likely to be perceived as threatening. With time and more successful interactions with technology, this is likely to change. Once people manage to integrate new technologies into the concept of their employment, they will start to rethink the notion of their professional self, including their skillset and strengths. Identity tends to be shaped by what we do repeatedly; hence, occupational identity will change in response to repeated interaction with new technology.⁶¹

The success of occupational identity change in response to technological changes seems to hinge on three conditions:

1. The type of task being replaced
2. The extent to which the technological change involves a change in understanding of how a task should be carried out
3. The strength of occupational identity that existed in the first place.

If technology is to replace a function that has been central to a person's occupational identity, then it is likely that it will be met with resistance. For example, if a medical general practitioner thinks of diagnosis as one of her key strengths, and her occupational identity hinges on her ability to carry out diagnoses, then of the process of accepting AI as a tool for diagnosing illness will probably be challenging and affect her professional identity and sense of self-worth. However, if workers can be encouraged to view technological change as an opportunity to extend or even enhance their occupational identity, rather than as a threat that replaces core parts of that identity, resistance is less likely to occur.

Another factor that seems to be important in predicting the impacts of technological change is whether or not the change conflicts with a person's understanding of how a task should be carried out. If a new technology fails to yield the correct results, in the opinion of professionals or experts in the field, then it is less likely to be embraced, because it will conflict with values that matter to their core identities.

Finally, the strength of existing occupational identity also plays an important role. People with a particularly strong occupational identity appear to experience greater difficulty in adapting to technological change. This may be because identity discontinuity is more easily experienced under such conditions.

4.7 digital platform work – changes in identity

Digital platform jobs have already changed the ways in which certain work is organised, carried out and rewarded. New forms of work bring with them increased levels of flexibility, in terms of the employment relationship, the scheduling of work, and place of work. This has created new opportunities for some high-skilled workers, whilst putting pressure on lower-skilled workers.⁶² Whilst little is yet known about the professional identities of these skilled, digital platform workers, one symptom of highly flexible work is that people have fewer opportunities to identify with their employer or their role.⁶³

Traditional work arrangements typically come with structures of supervision and feedback, which provide external cues and a frame of reference for organisation-related identity behaviour.⁶⁴ Digital platform work often lacks that human supervision, and feedback is often given in a more quantitative, automated way. Furthermore, there tends to be less space for input from employees, which limits opportunities for organisational participation. In this scenario, there is a greater risk that organisational initiatives will be

perceived as unjust and it can be harder to develop positive, work-related identities.⁶⁵

Digital platform work often requires people to handle multiple jobs in order to make ends meet and pay the bills. Working multiple jobs comes with particular challenges for identity. One qualitative study that followed multiple job holders over a period of time found that the process of developing a coherent self-narrative was initially perceived as being difficult and stressful.⁶⁶ However, over time, successful identity integration led to a recognition that multiple jobs can actually constitute to the development of a useful 'patchwork identity'.

It is clear that digitalisation and computerisation both alter the social contexts in which work is carried out. These changes are likely to affect the work-based identities of employees in a range of ways, creating challenges at first, and inducing identity change later. Failure to master these identity challenges seems to be the greatest risk. If people manage to conceptualise new developments as a process of identity enrichment, rather than as an experience of loss, it is more likely that they will embrace positive and inclusive identity narratives as well.

5. 'bullshit jobs'

'Hell is a collection of individuals who are spending the bulk of their time working on a task they don't like and are not especially good at.'
(Graeber, 2018)

Imagine the following scenario: you are a well-educated young person in a reputable job, with an appealing title, earning a comfortable salary in a large, well-known organisation. There is only one catch: you secretly realise that your job is utterly and completely pointless, that it is actually a scam.

This describes the heart of what Graeber referred to, rather crudely, as 'bullshit jobs'. Bullshit jobs are defined as 'a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case'.⁶⁷ Examples of people working in bullshit jobs are, according to Graeber: receptionists that are only there to staff a front desk that no one ever visits; IT people whose only task is to work-around other peoples' programming mistakes; or strategic managers who oversee a team of other, highly-independent and self-sufficient managers.

How widespread is this phenomenon? According to a poll conducted by YouGov in 2015⁶⁸, 37 per cent of all surveyed Britons felt that their job failed to make a meaningful contribution to the world. Meaningfulness is a very strong motivator at work. A recent survey amongst American professionals found that nine out of ten employees would be willing to give up part of their salary in return for more meaningful employment.⁶⁹ Whether jobs are objectively more 'bullshit' now than they were a few decades ago is difficult to say. Graeber argues that one reason for employment becoming less meaningful is that, according to work surveys, the majority of work time has increasingly shifted away from primary work duties, towards dealing with emails, 'wasteful' meetings and administrative tasks. At the same time, the number of administrators and managers has risen – in universities, for example, by 135 per cent between 1975 and 2005.⁷⁰

Being trapped in a meaningless job comes with serious psychological consequences. First, the experience of meaninglessness questions the fundamental conception that life should be purposeful. Second, people in bullshit jobs also report an element of 'falseness': they know that what they are doing is irrelevant and even deceitful, but that they are, at the same time, required to convince others that the opposite is true. Third, there is a sense of entrapment – of not being able to change a situation or to escape from it. The final section outlines the possible long-term impacts of these scenarios.

5.1 meaninglessness and boredom

Meaning is relational.⁷¹ Meaning connects experiences, people, places and objects with one another in predictable ways. It creates a coherent narrative that can turn chaos into order. Eudemonics approaches the realisation of wellbeing or happiness from a meaning and self-realisation perspective (rather than the hedonic approach, which focuses on pleasure attainment and pain avoidance). Meaningful activities lie at the heart of the eudemonic experience of happiness or psychological wellbeing.⁷² Eudemonic happiness has often been described as the ultimate goal; the most desirable outcome of human agency. Engaging in virtuous activity that is in line with one's true potential can induce such a state.⁷³ Good work – that is, work that creates a sense of purpose, self-realisation and growth, or work that enables positive relations with others and a positive experience of self-mastery – has been found to enable eudemonic happiness. In

short, meaningful work can help us to achieve eudemonic happiness, connectedness and a sense of belonging. However, the opposite is true for meaningless work.

Identities and the experience of meaningfulness are closely related. Identities can give meaning to the wider environment and to one's very existence. By knowing who one is, it is easier to explain what is going on in the immediate environment, to know how to feel, how to behave and what to value.⁷⁴ Discovering a meaningful layer in everyday existence enables individuals to deal with uncertainty. Meaning can help explain the circumstances of the social environment, make everyday life predictable, and thereby reduce stress.⁷⁵⁷⁶ Identities create a sense of order and structure, reducing ambiguity and uncertainty, and thereby providing meaning.

In contrast, doing something meaningless is often associated with boredom. The psychologist Erich Fromm defines boredom as anxiety about the absence of meaning in a person's activities and circumstances.⁷⁷ The experience of meaningless disconfirms and undermines a person's identity. If identity can give meaning, then the reverse is true as well: meaninglessness signals that the present identity is not 'right' for the situation.

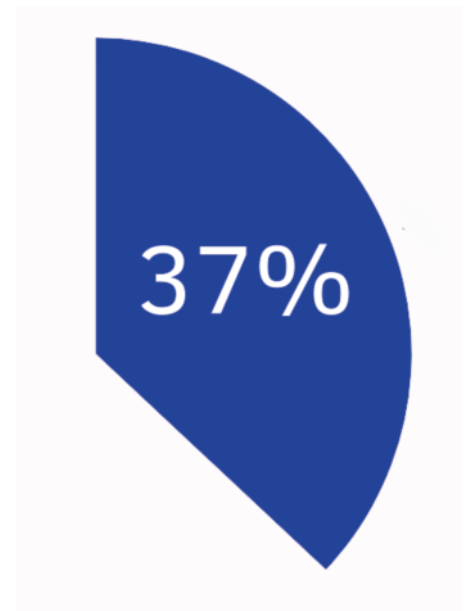
Graeber gives an example of a young graduate, Eric, who used to work in a meaningless job. Eric described his frustrations with the fact that he could not see any way of construing meaning in his work; his job felt utterly purposeless. This feeling eventually led him to quit the role, as he felt 'it was not for him'.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, Eric's former colleagues had managed to find a sense of purpose in their (objectively meaningless) job situations. For example, they had managed to view their work as a stepping-stone towards professional advancement, which still fitted with their current and aspired identity. As a result, they were less affected than Eric was by the inherently meaningless nature of their work.

5.2 falseness

Aside from purposelessness, the experience of falseness also characterises bullshit jobs. People are aware that their jobs ought not to exist in the first place, that the products they are selling have no use for their clients or customers, or that the services they are providing are not actually necessary. However, their employer often has a different opinion, or at least expects employees to pretend otherwise. The enforced falseness and pretence generate a number of psychological conflicts, including cognitive dissonance. The workers know that what they are doing is a scam, which conflicts with their self-understanding as a professional and ethical person. For example, a requirement to sell faulty products can undermine a person's professional self-understanding. The scam is not the result of the employee's action, but stems from the organisational set-up and the job structure.

People in bullshit jobs do not subscribe to scamming others – it is the employer, the organisation or the system that does that. It is usually incorrect to assume that these employees are 'living their own lie', because most of them experience an immense conflict between what they are required to do and what they think would be the right thing to do.

People in meaningless and false jobs find it particularly challenging to develop positively self-validating identities around their employment. Perceiving that their work lacks purpose and is actually deceitful can oppose their professional values but also make it difficult to explain and justify their work to others. In



Percentage of Britons who felt that their job failed to make a meaningful contribution to the world. (YouGov, 2015)

other words, the kind of social interaction that is crucial for identity verification is thus rendered more complicated, or even impossible. An example might be someone who works as a risk analyst in a highly reputable financial company, but whose responsibility is limited to dragging numbers from one spreadsheet to another. Justifying a high salary to people who potentially earn less for doing more is difficult, and challenges the sense of self that is connected to employment.

There are very few cultural scripts available to help make sense of this situation or to craft a meaningful narrative out of a meaningless situation. Under such circumstances it is more difficult to share one's work experiences with others. This is reflected in the often-secretive element of bullshit professions; people might admit to themselves (or others, in private) that their job is meaningless, but they would struggle do so in front of their supervisor or others working in the same organisation.

5.3 entrapment, tension and powerlessness

The third element inherent in purposeless, false jobs is the experience of entrapment. There is often very little, and sometimes nothing, that an affected individual can do to render their employment more meaningful. Even quitting might not be an option – due to comfortable salaries and financial obligations. This leaves people trapped, forced to continue a game of make-believe, as if controlled by forces beyond their control and subject to circumstances that are not of their own making.⁷⁹

Lack of control over one's environment is a key stress factor.⁸⁰ Indeed, stress was an often-reported experience in Graeber's original study. This creates the paradoxical situation that bullshit jobs, despite being purposeless and often utterly boring, are still not without stress or tension. A sense of control is also linked to self-identity⁸¹: identity-crafting can serve the purpose of establishing control over a chaotic environment. If one is unable to develop self-knowledge around a meaningless and false job, it becomes more difficult, if not impossible, to create a connection between oneself and the social world.

Being entrapped in a situation can also frustrate employees' attempts to achieve their personal goals. If the aspiration is to deliver meaningful, responsible projects, but the organisation constrains this through 'bullshit' procedures and tasks, or by limiting their ability to push back against deceitful and purposeless roles, negative emotions such as frustration will ensue.⁸² According to the classic frustration-aggression hypothesis,⁸³ people who experience frustration tend to react with aggression. Since there is an interpersonal element to bullshit jobs – the perception that others are 'in the know' but not helping – it is likely that aggression will be targeted at other people. Interpersonal anger, cruelty and psychological warfare are key experiences that employees in bullshit jobs identify in the workplace.⁸⁴

5.4 the consequences of purposelessness, falseness, entrapment

In summary, meaningless and false employment entails psychological and behavioural risks – which have consequences for the wider social environment. One outcome of boredom, for example, is that people exhibit more in-group favouritism and intergroup discrimination. Given that boredom and meaninglessness both undermine identity, people tend to compensate by taking up a more extreme position in regard to others (at least in laboratory experiments⁸⁵). This could mean that employees in bullshit jobs might try to find a positive experience in their situation by overplaying differences between themselves and people who are without employment, for example.

Another effect of boredom is nostalgia.⁸⁶ It appears that dwelling on the past can facilitate identity continuity. In other words, someone who finds themselves in a meaningless and false job might become nostalgic about previous occupations they held, in order to cope with the present situation. Given the risks of nostalgia

(including resistance to change, or reduced acceptance of minorities) this can have serious implications for the development of more inclusive and collective identities.

Finally, bullshit jobs can induce aggression towards the organisation and other colleagues, thanks to the frustration and anger that they provoke. This can also have a detrimental impact on the development of community cohesion and stable social relationships, both in the workplace and beyond.

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What could potential remedies look like? Entrapment is difficult to change. Meaning, however, can be found in many places, including in other activities. Graeber describes how some workers used the internet at work to create a side business that brings a greater sense of meaning and purpose. In these cases, no one had noticed that they were spending less time on the 'work' they had been asked to do. Others in his study opted for part-time work, spending the other half of their day in a lower paid but more meaningful job. There are certainly ways of tackling meaninglessness and the proliferation of bullshit jobs, but they require a level of enterprise and ambition that not everyone trapped in purposeless work might be able to muster.

6. unemployment and worklessness

‘The extraordinary prevalence of unemployment and worklessness is perhaps the single most important contributor to the persistence of social exclusion in a large and momentous scale.’

(A Sen, 2000)

Work is core to people’s identity and essential to their understanding of themselves and the world around them. What happens when work is lost? Does this entail the loss, or partial loss, of someone’s identity as well? How can people cope with the loss of an important component of identity? How can workless people find a positive, self-verifying definition of themselves in a social environment that so strongly values achievement through work?

6.1 on the experience of unemployment and worklessness

According to recent data from the Labour Force Survey,⁸⁷ around 13.9 per cent of all households in Britain are workless. Worklessness includes unemployed people as well as economically inactive people, i.e. students, retirees, carers, or people who are incapable to work for health reasons. The term ‘workless’ can hence be misleading, since some people who are out of the labour force (i.e. not gainfully employed) are, in fact, still working, for instance in academic work or as carers.

Being unemployed is challenging and detrimental to individuals, as meta-analyses of available research indicate. One such study,⁸⁸ which summarised the findings of 324 published studies on 458,820 participants, conducted between 1963 and 2004 in 26 countries, revealed a clear causal association between unemployment and health. In comparison to employed people, unemployed people reported lower levels of subjective wellbeing, lower self-esteem, higher rates of depression, and greater anxiety. Several factors seemed to enlarge this effect, such as long-term unemployment, having to leave blue-collar occupations for unemployment, and being male.

The year of data collection appeared to have no influence on the scale of the impacts; in other words, there had been no normalisation of unemployment over time. Being unemployed in the 2000s was just as challenging as being unemployed in the 1960s. The longitudinal evidence in this meta-analysis further confirmed that, whilst there were selection effects (for example, people with impaired mental health had a higher chance of becoming unemployed), the impact of these factors was comparably small, whereas the causal effect of unemployment on health was clear.

Whilst the impact of unemployment on health outcomes appears to be indisputable, there are many different explanations for why this is the case. Most of these focus on the experience of deprivation and loss, but there is also evidence for the experience of incongruence and injustice playing a part. The next section illustrates how the mechanisms of unemployment affect identity and self-understanding.

Unless otherwise provided for, unemployment and worklessness deprive people of regular work income. Financial deprivation and poverty entail a host of negative repercussions, mostly concerning a loss of agency.⁸⁹ In more extreme situations, being unable to afford a bus ticket, a coffee or a meal with a friend limits an individual’s ability to participate in day-to-day social life or to engage with and get the support of friends and acquaintances.

Aside from financial implications, unemployment and worklessness deprive people of experiences that are unique to employed work and essential for wellbeing.^{90,91} For example, workless people have fewer opportunities to engage in purposeful and meaningful activities that contribute to the common good and a social purpose. Whilst employment does not automatically guarantee such opportunities (see the previous section on 'bullshit jobs'), it does at least increase relevant possibilities. Similarly, unemployed people have fewer opportunities to meet new social contacts and engage in positive and rewarding social interaction. Unemployment also entails a loss of day-to-day routine activity and time structure; there is no weekend from being unemployed and no free time either. In addition, there is no individual and no relevant employment structure that activates individuals regularly, by requiring them to get up and engage in activity. This loss of less obvious, and perhaps latent, functions of employment contributes to the negative experience of unemployment, as numerous studies have shown.⁹²

Being unemployed also carries social stigma. Unemployed people often report feeling looked down upon or having a sense of 'being on the scrapheap'. Employed people often seek out reasons to blame unemployed people for their situation – by devaluing their skills, knowledge and abilities, or by implying that they are somehow responsible for their own unfortunate circumstances, due to a lack of determination or grit. Unemployed people also often perceive their status as highly unjust, and out of line with their own values and expectations for their lives.⁹³

6.2 impact on identity

All of these experiences – financial deprivation, loss of breadth of experience, stigma, perceived injustice – have a negative impact on an unemployed individual's understanding of themselves as a competent and professional, working person.

Exclusion, due to stigma and financial deprivation, means fewer opportunities for positive interaction and a reduction in scope for developing a positive sense of self. Unemployed people cease to belong to the social group of ordinary employees, who are considered to live in accordance with a desired social norm. As a result, they struggle to participate in some of the key institutions of society. Furthermore, financial deprivation reduces opportunities for meaningful social interaction and has an impact on consumerism, which is generally considered to be a desirable, routine activity. Stigma further undermines opportunities for self-validation, and thereby affects identity and self-esteem. As a consequence, meaningful and self-validating encounters with others become less likely. Research shows that this is indeed reflected in the self-definition of unemployed people: as a result of experiencing exclusion from the working population, they tend to feel wider social isolation.⁹⁴

Loss of opportunities to engage in experiences, as a result of unemployment, can lead to identity disruption and experiences of discontinuity. As we see in the case of people whose jobs suddenly change, the more essential the lost job was to somebody's occupational self-understanding, the more affected their sense of self and identity will be. For example, newly unemployed individuals who primarily defined themselves in terms of work, via an organisation or organisational membership, tend to experience a higher degree of identity disruption. In contrast, individuals who primarily defined themselves in work-related categories that were independent of their job are likely to be less affected. For example, even if an employing institution let an individual go, that person could continue to hold their occupation, and their occupational identity.

Identity is informed by enactment⁹⁵: the more someone enacts a certain role, the more they 'become' that particular role, and the more that role becomes a part of them. Worklessness means that people are hindered in enacting their occupation. The less frequently they can perform the tasks, responsibilities and core elements of their occupation, the less likely they are to define themselves in terms of that occupation. Over the long run, this can potentially undermine future career goal setting, because making plans for the future depends on one's present self-image.⁹⁶

The longer people are unemployed or workless, the more this experience will become part of their self-understanding. There are positive aspects to this: research shows that a shared negative experience can also foster group identification. An unemployed individual could identify with other unemployed or workless people, and thereby gain social and emotional support, as well as understanding. However, identifying with a stigmatised group does not necessarily lead to a positive self-image. Research amongst unemployed people in Belgium⁹⁷ showed that, whenever unemployed people identified strongly with the negatively evaluated group of unemployed people, they reported a higher number of health complaints. This indicates that people do not 'choose' to identify with the unemployed, as such identification brings more negative consequences.

Stigma further undermines opportunities for self-validation, and thereby affects identity and self-esteem. As a consequence, meaningful and self-validating encounters with others become less likely. Research shows that this is indeed reflected in the self-definition of unemployed people: as a result of experiencing exclusion from the working population, they tend to feel wider social isolation.

Ironically, the fact that unemployment is likely to be perceived as identity disruption will make identity particularly salient to an individual. Whereas, under normal circumstances, people rarely reflect on who they are, a dramatic sense-breaking experience is likely to trigger a degree of self-awareness that previously was not there. This kind of awareness is generally not a positive experience though, as unemployment is not a positive identity category. Drawing on previous research into identity-crafting,⁹⁸ several predictions can be made: feeling excluded from 'normal' working life is likely to trigger a need to belong, which can make a person more aware of their identity. People who experience a weaker sense of belonging are likely to be motivated to either reaffirm their membership to valued groups or to join alternative groups. Furthermore, the disruption of meaning that accompanies the loss of employment may trigger a search for new ways of seeing oneself positively. The cues that unemployed people receive from their surroundings with regard to their social status, values and competencies are unlikely to foster a process of positive self-validation.

6.3 what can be done?

Perhaps societies will always have some degree of unemployment. Given the importance of work in peoples' understanding of the world and their place in it, the question arises of how we might enable people who are workless to, nonetheless, develop positive working identities.

Identity crafting is not fully within an individual's control; it is also heavily influenced by the social context. One key factor seems to be the opportunity to experience positive interactions with esteemed others. Positive identities develop through enactment and social validation, through recognition and esteem in the eyes of other people.⁹⁹ It is in this sense that the perceptions of others become a part of self-perception. Social validation of an aspired working identity depends on the degree to which someone can exhibit that identity. For example, a workless individual who is appreciated for contributing work-specific expertise, skills and knowledge will feel reinforced in that part of their working identity.

This kind of validation can happen intentionally, or it can be subtle and implicit. In addition, experiences from the past can play a role: social validation of previously held, positive working identities can allow for identity continuity. By giving unemployed and workless people the opportunity to enact their aspired and positively evaluated working identities, these parts of their identity can be fostered and lead to a more positive understanding of self. Certainly, social participation and enactment hinge on the right financial circumstances.

Perhaps in the long run, by changing the social narrative around unemployment and creating more positive opportunities, we could allow people to understand themselves as more able, knowledgeable, worthwhile beings, regardless of their current employment status.

7. conclusion

This document has outlined how working identity is informed by social context and social encounters in the workplace. The five work situations discussed above are the result of macro-economic, cultural, and technological changes; however, it is through their effect on self-understanding that they will impact on individual behaviours, emotions and attitudes.

All five work situations entail experiences of identity discontinuity and identity change. Whether it is the steelworker who has to retrain after losing an industrial job, office employees who have to redefine their work to include new technology, or the person who just lost his or her job, such transformations impact on people's self-concept as working people and on their sense of belonging to social groups. Furthermore, all five work situations bear the risk of undermining people's sense of stability with regard to the future. A person whose job is at risk of being replaced, or who works in irregular, precarious employment, or who believes their job is totally pointless, will experience estrangement from both the local community and wider society – especially since work is an important aspect of how they evaluate their sense of self and their ability to contribute to society. Under such circumstances, people are more likely to seek refuge in a more robust sense of identity for control and guidance.

This bears risks, especially if someone's self-concept is destabilised and they struggle to redefine themselves positively. Negative or fractured identities can have serious impacts on health and career planning. Frustration in the enactment of positive work-based identities can lead to aggression, something that is well documented amongst holders of 'bullshit jobs'. Nostalgia can, furthermore, undermine efforts to develop a positive, contemporary sense of self, and might entail stereotyping of other social groups and a refusal to engage with the real-life challenges that result from fast-paced, economic and social transformations.

On a more positive note, human beings have shown innovation and resilience in dealing with sense-breaking experiences and identity disruption. We can customise our identity, for example, by broadening our self-concept or developing a more nuanced understanding of our work situation. By continuously enacting newly customised identities, and by receiving positive validation for them, people can change their understanding of themselves.

We need to pay attention to the identity challenges that new work conditions entail. In sense-breaking situations, such as in the five scenarios outlined above, people are more likely to look for support – orientation and guidance – than in routine, everyday working environments. A robust and reliable identity can help them to develop effective ways of engaging with challenges and addressing transformations successfully. It is during these moments in life that a psychologically safe and supportive social environment is particularly valuable in helping people to maintain, redesign, or even re-establish, their sense of identity in a positive way.

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