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Feeling precarious: Millennial women and work

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Abstract

In *Precarious Life* (2004), Judith Butler writes about how a shared sense of fear and vulnerability opens the possibility of recognizing interdependency. This is a wider understanding of precarity than is often present in human geography – recognizing the consequences and possibilities of feeling precarious. Focusing on work and the workplace, I examine the working life stories of millennial women in Canada, a labour market where unemployment and underemployment are common experiences for young workers. Using work narratives of insecurity, I argue that one potential consequence of understanding precariousness is the recognition of our social selves, using millennial women’s stories of mutual reliance and connection with parents, partners and friends to contrast assumptions of the individualizing, neoliberal, Gen Y worker. I use a feminist understanding of agency and autonomy to argue that young women’s stories about work are anything but individual experiences of flexibility or precarity – instead, I explain how relationships play a critical role in worker agency and whether work feels flexible or precarious. Overall I consider what a feminist theorizing of interdependence and precariousness offers geography, emphasizing the importance of subjectivity and relationality.

Keywords

Precariousness, relational autonomy, work, gender, millennial generation, Canada

Introduction

At a recent AAG session on the Kilburn Manifesto, Doreen Massey mentioned that young people have only ever known neoliberalism – they have grown up and entered the workforce in neoliberal times. For the millennial generation in Canada (roughly born between 1980 and 1995), many have entered the world of work in a time of economic austerity. In practice, this means a high unemployment rate for young people, and a high rate of underemployment for young adults (Bernard, 2013). While a variety of actors have drawn attention to the consequences of ‘employment scarring’ for young people (where unemployment is linked to further unemployment and lower wages in the future) (Arulampalam et al., 2001; Quinn, 2014), much less is known about the employment experiences of older millennials, who are now 24–34, as this period of young adulthood is often folded into broader age categories in national statistics. There is also a gendered story for millennials in Canada, where young

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women still experience a gender pay gap, and make up a larger proportion of part-time and contract workers. Just like other age groups, millennial women do more unpaid work than men, and there are specific challenges for women around when and if to have children, what researchers have called the ‘mother load’ (Villalobos, 2014).

Rather than to evaluate how much the labour market for young adults has changed over a generation, including the shift to more jobs that are contract and part-time, this article investigates the affective and social consequences of work, and in particular how young women understand the place of work in their own lives. Recent work in labour geography has called for greater research on the subjective experiences of workers as part of understanding their agency (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Lier, 2007) and this article brings a social geographer's lens to this aim (see also Rogaly, 2009). McDowell's (2007, 2007; Hardgrove et al., 2015b; McDowell et al., 2014) ongoing concern with work identities has been invaluable to the framing of this research, interrogating the intersection of social categories of difference including age and gender at work.

This article aims to make two contributions to feminist economic geography: First, while previous research has dealt with economic precarity (Kern, 2012; Lewis et al., 2015; Vosko and Clark, 2009), it has had less to say about the related, subjective experience of precariousness (although see Neilson and Rossiter, 2008 for the political possibilities of precarity). Second, building on my research with millennial women, I want to suggest that rather than reinscribe the trope of the neoliberal individual, many young workers rely on others to confront or at least attempt to manage feeling precarious, and that this interdependence requires further attention – developing an understanding of relational autonomy in geography. In sum, I aim to advance debates around youth and precarity by examining the consequences of feeling precarious, including the possibility of recognizing interdependence through the theorization of the social self.

The next section reviews literature on precarity and precariousness, using Judith Butler's (2009a) work to position interdependency as a 'shared condition' of precarity. Thinking through the concept of interdependence, the article focuses on the possibilities offered by feminist theorizing of autonomy as relational. A discussion of the methods used in this research follows, considering the power of narrative. The main body of the article examines young women's experiences of precariousness as narratives of insecurity. These narratives demonstrate how the affective often supersedes the rational (a permanent job does not necessarily mean one feels secure). Throughout these examples I demonstrate how millennial women attempt to mitigate feelings of insecurity, using Butler's work on interdependence, but rescaling her argument using feminist work on relational autonomy and the social self (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000b).

Understanding affective connections to work

Precarity, precariousness and interdependence

Although relatively new to geographers, the concept of precarity has a long history in continental Europe, connecting experiences of insecurity to political possibilities for resistance (McDowell and Christopherson, 2009). According to Waite (2009: 416), precarity 'conjures life worlds that are inflected with uncertainty and instability'. From this definition, research on precarity generally has a subjective or objective focus, with the latter referencing changes in the labour markets of the West away from full time, permanent jobs to ones that are more contingent, including contract and part-time positions. In Canada, researchers often refer to the Standard Employment Relationship and work that

falls short of this normative standard as precarious employment (Goldring and Joly, 2014). For example, work on gender and precarious employment explicitly 'equates precariousness in employment first of all with job characteristics rather than with worker characteristics or with subjective experiences (or feelings)' and uses labour market statistics, including data on underemployment and unemployment, to define precarity (Vosko et al., 2009: 2). While highly valuable, these objective uses of precarity do not tell the whole story as affective experiences of insecurity have a significant impact on a worker's choices and experiences of the labour market.

Rather than focus on the economic, researchers are also examining the more subjective experience of precarity, or what I call 'feeling precarious'. Ettliger (2007) examines precarity in the 'microspaces of daily life', mobilizing Foucauldian governmentality to think through possibilities for resisting neoliberal capitalism. Green (2009) contrasts economic measures of precarity with their perceived impact, highlighting that women tend to experience more insecurity, but gendered impacts vary by the form of the economy and other national factors. Harker (2012) uses 'Butler's social ontology of precariousness' to consider the political and ethical work of Palestinian families. Research beyond geography has also used the concept more broadly. In development studies, Standing (2011) has written about young people as part of a new precariat, or new social class, and in political science Schram (2013) picks up on Butler's use of precariousness to examine its potential as an 'action framework' for the Occupy Movement. This literature focuses on mobilizing the political potential around the concept of precarity. In this article I am more interested in how feeling precarious is experienced by the individual, and what experiences might coalesce around gender and age. In Judith Butler's writing (2004, 2009b, 2012), 'precariousness is an ontological and existential category that describes the common, but unevenly distributed, fragility of human corporeal existence' (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005). In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* Butler (2004) collects a series of essays written after 11 September 2001 that examine how our vulnerability reveals connections to known and unknown others. Essays examine who gets a 'grievable death' where some deaths valorize the national project and other are forgotten, as well as 'unliveable lives' for Guantanamo Bay detainees. In particular, the essay 'Precarious Life' examines the theoretical roots for these arguments, using the work of Levinas to explore how ethics relies on the recognition of our precariousness. Butler (2004: 132) quotes Levinas: 'my duty to respond to the other suspends my natural right to self-survival, le droit vitale, My ethical relation of love for the other stems from the fact that the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world'. Examining the complicated metaphor of the 'face' of the Other, Butler discusses who has the power to be seen as human, especially in times of war and violence. In later work, Butler builds on this theoretical work beyond global politics (2012: 148) claiming that: "Precarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency". Butler's conversation with Sunaura Taylor (2009: 210–211) in the film *Examined Life* leads her to link a shared experience of precarity to a sense of interdependency: "I think that there are certain notions of autonomy, of self-sufficiency, that have actually led us astray, [...] And to the degree that we find ways of moving, of living, we do so because we've been cared for by people and we continue to be cared for by people. Systems of care are essential to human relationality and they don't ever cease to be". This framing leads to the main theoretical contention of this article: if part of feeling precarious is the recognition of our interdependency – where does this take us? For my purposes, thinking through interdependency leads to an understanding of the self as social, and an understanding of agency as relational. Rather than disavow claims of agency and autonomy as falsely atomistic and overly rational, feminist theorizing of the social self

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demonstrates that agential choices are valuable, but “will always be a shared task, one that we do in concert and conversation with others” (Barclay, 2000: 68).

From the neoliberal flexible individual to feminist work on relational autonomy

As a response to the generalized insecurity of neoliberalism, a significant body of research in youth geography and youth studies argues that young people engage with processes of individualization as a way to mitigate risk (Alloway and Dalley-Trim, 2009; Kelly, 2005). Drawing on the influential work of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, individualization refers to ‘an ethic of individual self fulfillment’ (see also Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 2002), where young people build up their own ‘choice biography’ based on chosen affinities, rather than family or class constraints. Many have critiqued the concept of individualization for ‘not paying enough attention to structural barriers that often preclude the opportunity to follow up on desired choices (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Skelton, 2002) – yet it remains a powerful explanatory narrative for young people in neoliberal times. This article pursues a different angle of critique – arguing that rather than creating atomistic individuals, for many millennial women their experience of work is anything but individualized. While radical feminist challenges to work are instructive – Kathi Weeks’ (2011) call to not be bound to an employment relation, to value ‘life’ over ‘work’ – what I propose is to recognize how ‘life’, especially our *affective* connections, shape our perception and decisions about employment. Building on feminist critiques and recuperations of autonomy (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000b), my research pursues a relational understanding of agency and autonomy in young women’s working lives to more fully capture the consequences of work and the workplace on young women’s identities. In particular, this means recognizing that choices and actions are always in dialogue with the critical perspectives of real and imagined others (Westlund, 2009). To connect this thinking to feminist geography more widely, in a lecture for *Progress in Human Geography*, Linda McDowell (2004: 156) argues we need to replace the ideal of “an independent individual fully participating in the labour market” with one of “solidarity and mutuality between networks of individuals in relationships of different forms of interdependence”. I aim to advance critiques of individualization by bringing it into conversation with feminist theorizing on relational autonomy, namely that the self is inherently social.

In practice this means a more in-depth engagement with women’s narratives of their working lives. For example, while a few women told me their success at work is ‘down to me, I worked hard to get here’ – this sense of agency can also be understood as relational. Nedelsky (1989: 12) says “if we ask ourselves what actually enables people to be autonomous, the answer is not isolation, but relationships – with parents, teachers, friends, loved ones”. Moreover, Barclay (2000: 57) contends that “ongoing success as an autonomous agent is affected by our ability to share our ideas, our aspirations, and our beliefs in conversation with others”. Therefore, while a few women first attributed work success (or failure) to their own agential choices, implicit and explicit in their narratives were a range of social relationships that positively and negatively affected their autonomy. My use of relational autonomy and the social self aligns with Butler’s concerns with interdependence (Abrams, 2011; Butler and Taylor, 2009), although perhaps not going as far as recognizing ‘precarity of the Other’. Instead, similar to Mason’s (2004) argument for a ‘relational individualism’, this article considers greater recognition of the social self as a response to feelings of uncertainty in the labour market.

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The Working Lives project

The Working Lives project examined work and its social consequences with young women in Canada. The research was interested in how the workplace shapes identity and how young women make sense of work and the workplace. This research is situated within a particularly challenging time for millennial women in the labour market: while precarity is difficult to measure, research from Southern Ontario estimates that 20% of workers are in precarious employment, with a further 20% working in positions that are somewhat precarious (Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario (PEPSO), 2013). In 2014 millennial women in Canada were twice as likely than their male counterparts to be in part-time work (Statistics Canada, 2014); women are over-represented in forms of contract work, especially casual labour (Vosko and Clark, 2009) and a gender pay gap of 19% also puts women at a disadvantage (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2012). For young adults 25–34 with a university degree, 40% were working at a job that did not need that qualification (Uppal and LaRochelle-Co te , 2014). While much has been said about the youth unemployment rate during the recent recession, for young adults underemployment from over qualification and being unwillingly part-time is endemic, although it is difficult to track through statistics¹ (Canadian Labour Congress, 2014).

Methods for Working Lives included a national questionnaire and a set of narrative interviews. Research participants were Canadian women, born between 1980 and 1990. This ten year cohort represents roughly the first half of the millennial generation in Canada (Foot, 1998; Marshall, 2014), although definitions of the millennial generation can vary based on how ‘generation’ is defined. This cohort will most likely have completed a first degree/further education and be exploring work opportunities and establishing careers (Lyons et al., 2012). Young adult identities is an under-researched area of Geography, and the social sciences more broadly, with geographies of children and youth interested in the lives of young people up to age 25. This is slowly shifting as research centres instead around the concept of ‘lifecourse’ (Worth, 2015) and a critical geographies of age (Hopkins and Pain, 2007).

The questionnaire served as a recruitment tool for the interviews, as well as an opportunity to gather a diverse set of work experiences that included unemployment as well as volunteering, interning, contract, casual and permanent work. It was explicitly used to help structure the interview, with the interview schedule picking up on detailed responses and comments from optional survey text boxes that pointed to important issues for millennial women, including underemployment and work-life balance. Seven hundred thirty-six women responded to the questionnaire, which was shared over social media and by respondents themselves. While the survey did not aim to be generalizable to the entire population of millennial women in Canada, several of the questions ‘Have you been unemployed’ and ‘Have you been underemployed’ track national statistics for the same age group of women (Statistics Canada, 2015).

Main data collection for the project was 33 narrative interviews with millennial women, as well as interviews with seven of their mothers. Women opted into the interview stage of the research at the end of the survey, and I purposively recruited a group of participants in terms of ethnicity, sexuality, disability and social class to ensure the research matched the diversity of their cohort. Following the work of Linda McDowell (2013) and other feminist economic geographers (Strauss, 2012; Waite et al., 2015), interviews were identified as an ideal way to incorporate the voice of workers and their personal experiences of work and the workplace. I have also benefitted from Foster’s (2013) ‘working life stories’ approach, where narrative is

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employed to get women talking about the interplay of work and life. In the sociology of work literature narratives of working people are foundational (Terkel, 1972) and more recently researchers like Devadason (2007) have used life narratives to examine precarious work. The benefits of a narrative approach is that it allows me to hear how young women make sense of work – not just the factual details of what they are doing, but the more subtle issues about what is important to them and why. Interviewees were asked to tell the story of their working life, and interviews were concluded by asking for critical comments or reflections on key themes of the research. Narrative informs how we order experiences for ourselves and understand meaning in our own lives (Bruner, 2004). In particular for this project, working lives are shaped by metanarratives of precariousness and insecurity that come from somewhere, and connect beyond the individual. I contend that young women's narratives are informed by the work experiences of those around them – including parents, friends and partners, picking up on social relationality of identity (Riessman, 2008). Finally, using a narrative interview structure can allow participants to have more control of the research encounter, as the format plays off of our existing ability to tell stories of the self (McAdams et al., 2006).

Interviews continued with a diverse group of Canadian women born in the 1980s until experiences and themes began to be repeated. This process allows the research to examine work in the context of gendered young adulthood, developing an understanding of concepts and processes (including feeling precarious and the social self). Working Lives: Millennial Women and Work used a framework analysis (Ritchie et al., 2013) to work with its dataset. After familiarization with the interviews and the open text questionnaire responses, I developed a set of emergent key themes which were refined and organized as analysis continued. Interview transcripts were indexed with key themes and then charted in spreadsheets with a series of subthemes. The resulting framework allows interpretation by participant, but also by theme/subtheme, while always linking back to the wider context of the narrative. The framework was further developed by linking specific themes to open text questionnaire responses. This process allows for rigorous interrogation of the data at multiple times, through a variety of lenses, building the conceptual argument that forms this article.

Narratives of insecurity at work

This section shares excerpts of young women's stories about their working lives to examine feelings of precarity and the possibilities of the social self. Most participants used language of uncertainty and vulnerability throughout the interview, telling me about their attempts to mitigate risk wherever possible. Yet it is important to acknowledge that a few young women spoke explicitly about enjoying a 'pay as you go' lifestyle of flexibility and personal freedom, insisting they were happy to take life and work as it comes. While one expectation would be that social class or other forms of privilege might explain this framing of flexibility/precarity, the narratives revealed a more complicated picture, with relationships (with siblings, parents, partners, friends and colleagues) having a significant impact on millennial women's perceptions and experiences of work. For Kristin, being in charge of one's time was crucial:

KRISTIN: I mean, [being self-employed] allows me to kind of choose where I am going to go. [...]. But I mean, it's like I told one of my other staff members the other day. I said, well part of being self-employed is you pick a day a week that you only work a half day. Like say, Wednesday afternoon is going to be my appointment time and you schedule yourself that way. I really enjoy

that flexibility. Like today, I am working from home in my pyjamas. It's awesome. (31, freelance health worker)

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In some ways one could argue that Kristin embraces neoliberal individualism – valuing the ‘freedom’ of self employment in a job that others might find stressful – but her experience can also be read as an ‘urge for certainty’ through the ‘reflexive denial of precarious life’ as she later estimates she usually works more than 60 hours per week and has no benefits and is delaying starting a family as a result (Ettlinger, 2007). Moreover, what makes her working life possible is her partner's steady income. She speaks of her husband later in the interview, explaining that not only has he put her career first, she says his emotional support is critical to her success at work. So while she was one of a few respondents to use the language of flexibility rather than precarity, the social self emerges powerfully when one reads across working life stories in their entirety. The following sections detail participants' feelings of precariousness as well as their experiences of interdependence, beginning with those that also map onto economic definitions of precarity and then expanding into three further narratives where feelings of precarity persist into so-called ‘secure’ employment.

Rachel: Economic precarity and feeling precarious

Many respondents' experiences matched objective definitions of precarity, as they were involved in part-time or contract work without benefits. For Pia (who has a seasonal contract position and dog sits as a sideline), or for Holly (who freelances in media production), not knowing when your next job will start, hoping you do not get sick, and reorganizing finances to pay rent mean that economic precarity and feeling precarious are copresent. For Rachel, feeling precarious defined her working life story, from bartending through college, administrative work through a temp agency, and having to leave a job that would not accommodate her pregnancy. When we met she was in the midst of an intense four month contract job that she hoped would be renewed, which she combined with employment insurance to make ends meet. Towards the end of our interview I asked Rachel to reflect on her experiences. She told me:

RACHEL: I think it can definitely take a toll on your mental health, on your emotional health, and wellbeing. You know, definitely spending some days you know, trying to fill in the day. Subsidized daycare, you have to keep them in the daycare. You can only take them out so many days out of the year. So for me, my daughter started – like we got our subsidy and it was great but she started when she was 11 months old. So I've had to – I essentially filled the last almost 7 months of not a whole lot of work. I think that that – that is actually really – like, I've talked to my doctor about that and it's taken a toll I think. Because it hammers your confidence and then you start trying to think – okay, is it something that I am doing? Is it something that I'm not doing? Like, I don't understand. (30, contract, part-time administrative role in public service)

Later, when she was telling me about where she lives, Rachel explained how important being part of a community was to her:

RACHEL: One of the reasons I've stayed here this long is because of my [next door] neighbours. And I looked at them and the fact that she was sitting on their porch, the kids were all playing – I looked at my realtor and said, ‘Let's put an offer in.’ And it was all decided there on the lawn. I

say that to my neighbour all the time – ‘You are one of the reasons I bought my house, you are not allowed to move!’ So it’s nice to be part of a community and it really started to hit a lot more when I got involved when I was on mat leave I got involved with our Neighbourhood Association and the community planning team. It’s kind of crazy how engaged everyone is and now I know more people on my street and in my neighbourhood. Even yesterday morning – so my daughter had a doctor’s appointment so we walked to the doctor’s office and I met three people that I knew to wave and say good morning. It makes a really big difference.

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The strength and support that Rachel feels from her community is just one of many relationships that are important to her, but its rootedness and sociality clearly helps her manage the stresses of unreliable paid work. Moreover, the meaning she derives from community work eases the emotional impact of stretches away from paid work. This held true for other participants, who used volunteer work to feel valued and appreciated when paid work was about survival or was unavailable. Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000a: 21) argue that “conceptualizing agents as emotional, embodied, desiring, creative, and feeling, as well as rational, creatures highlights the importance to autonomy of features of agents that have received little discussion in the literature, such as memory, imagination, and emotional dispositions and attitudes”. Rachel’s reflection on what matters to her and her agential shift to find value in community work rather than insecure paid work highlights an important emotional register that is often missing from accounts of worker agency, as well as moving work out of the traditional workplace and into the realm of social reproduction and political action.

Cheryl: Fear of returning to past precarity

Some participants in Working Lives had achieved the ‘standard employment relationship’ of a permanent job, with benefits and relative security. Importantly, feelings of precariousness remained, and continued to influence decisions within and beyond the labour market. For Erin, even though she had a permanent job as a legal advisor that she believed was ‘safe’, she was overwhelmed at the prospect of buying a house or securing the finances needed to start a family. This was true for most of the participants who had found permanent jobs – although they had some level of security, they did not trust it to last long term. I started off all the interviews by asking participants to tell me their working life story – for some this was a difficult task to tie diverse bits of work and experience together as it did not always suit a narrative structure. Following Sennett (1998: 122), “the short-term, flexible time of the new capitalism seems to preclude making a sustained narrative out of one’s labors, and so a career”. This was true for Cheryl, and we had the following exchange:

CHERYL: Well, I come from a family that is very working class. My mother won’t EVER turn down a job. She is a grifter. She works hard and she is an honest person and she raised us that way too. So a lot of the jobs I’ve had have always just been out of necessity or it came when I needed one and so I took it and I never really pursued anything like as my dream job to do this. [...] And my favourite would be – my first job was at a bowling alley in the snack bar. And then I bartended – the whole back of the bar was shaped like a giant pirate ship and the beer came out of the windows of the pirate ship. [laughter] I mean, I don’t really think any of them have been meaningful in terms of any sort of career path.

NANCY: You don’t think that they have led you to where you are now?

CHERYL: Well, only in terms of it being part of my timeline but they weren't – like, any writing that I did that got me here was all done on my own. Like free time, freelance writing. I do a little bit of writing on the side for a decorating magazine and for some art stuff but it's mostly not paid.

NANCY: Well, that's the work too.

CHERYL: Yeah, I guess you are right because I had never really had a job like this before. At first I was excited to have a grown up job but now yeah, I can see this vision of myself being there for the rest of my life and I just... I mean, they treat us well and it pays well and there is benefits and it's nice. This is the first time I have kind of felt settled so I am going to stick it out for a while and see how that goes. (32, full time technical writer)

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Cheryl followed her mother's example and took jobs that she needed to get by, not sure when they would end and she would have to find something else quickly in order to pay rent. Now she has a job with security, and is not currently willing to leave her first 'grown up job'. Cheryl's use of her mother's approach to work to begin her own working life story is instructive, linking to her own feelings about work as necessity, not as dream. A relational understanding of autonomy is not always about support and affirmation. Cheryl later relates that although her mother has been a powerful influence on her working life, they are not on speaking terms. Even at a distance, Cheryl's mother is part of her social self, influencing how Cheryl understands work as a means to an end (see Hardgrove et al., 2015a for a nuanced examination of family relations and young people in precarious work). Several participants told me about their fear of unemployment as a reason to take and keep any full time work, even if not in the field they trained for. Often, like in Cheryl's story, family influenced this fear, where participants saw their own experience in the labour market reinforced through past challenges faced by their parents. For others, stable work was too hard to give up for more risky entrepreneurial aspirations – Ann told me she could never give up a 'boring' job managing a small shop to start her own business because she could not cope with the threat to her livelihood. Rather than employment scarring, Knabe and Ra'tzel (2011) have used the term 'employment scaring', where past experiences of precarity makes workers unwilling to take a risk for a better position.

Ella: Borrowing insecurity

While many millennial women had personal experiences of labour market precarity, women also used the experience of others as a source of their insecurity – 'borrowing' or picking up on the zeitgeist of feeling precarious. This is an important consideration as this kind of insecurity also has tangible effects on young workers' decisions in the labour market. Ella recently returned to school to upgrade her qualifications. Even though she has the appropriate skills she has yet to work in her chosen field and she refers to herself as a 'student' rather than an 'engineer'. She told me:

ELLA: I have worked so many different jobs doing really demeaning stuff [laughs] just to make the money. But you know, that's – no, because I have never even tried for an industrial position. Like when I – the only thing that I can think of was when I was first trying to find people in [—] to hire me, one of the questions was what kind of remuneration I was looking for. I did a bit of research but I didn't want to undersell myself but I didn't want to oversell myself so I went with

like \$40,000 starting. To me, that's like RICH! [laughs] Like, if you give me \$20,000 I would be happy! [...] Like I know a lot of my peers are scraping by on minimum wage and some of them don't even LOOK for more because they don't like to think they CAN get more, you know. It's just like – and it is... Trying to get hired and having people say rude things. It's a really DEGRADING process. [laughs] (27, full time graduate student)

Ettlinger's (2007: 320) definition of precarity as 'a condition of vulnerability relative to contingency and the inability to predict' is useful here as Ella uses her friends' experiences of looking for work after graduation to predict her own failure in the job market. To use a concept from Ettlinger, Ella uses a strategy of 'homogenization' here, minimizing any differences between her and her friends as she tries to take the uncertainty and potential disappointment out of looking for work by deciding it is not worth to even try. This quest for certainty is an important way of contesting feeling precarious and it has real consequences for Ella's negotiation of the labour market – here the social self gives a sense of 'normative

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competence', or what's expected or appropriate in shared circumstances (Benson, 1990). For other millennial women, friends were often referenced in working life stories as an important resource of experience – almost acting as a proxy for what is possible in the labour market, including cautionary tales of moving for a partner's career or the challenges of balancing work and having a baby. Borrowing (and internalizing) friends' feelings of precarity reveals motivations for otherwise unexplained actions (like Ella avoiding the labour market) and is a powerful example of interdependency and the social self.

Rae: Underemployment – New realities of work for Canadian millennials

Finally, the emotional consequences of feeling underemployed are considerable for millennials, regardless of whether one meets statistical criteria of labour underutilization or being unwillingly part-time. While often overlapping with economic measures of precarity, feeling undervalued also occurs in positions that are relatively secure. I asked participants if they ever felt underemployed and Rae told me, "The last entire year of my life!" She went on to contrast her objectively precarious experience of low paid internships for non-profits and start-up companies, where she was given roles of responsibility and felt her voice was listened to, with her more secure role within a large corporation, where her role was circumscribed. In this move out of economic precarity, Rae exchanged financial insecurity for emotional insecurity at work. She told me:

RAE: It's a lot of me sitting around and waiting and I don't really get to do anything. Like there are days where I sit there and I literally have nothing to do for the day and it's just a normal part of working here. [...] So it does get very frustrating because I feel totally useless sometimes. You know, there are so many things that I could do. And my responsibilities have been cut back to like maybe a third of what I did in other organizations. [...] It is very frustrating. I will have bouts of depression and whatever. I mean, not as bad as when I was unemployed where there were days where I literally did not want to get out of bed because it was like it just felt redundant to me because I wasn't going to accomplish anything anyway. So I did get those feelings quite a bit. I mean, at least I have somebody to vent that out to. My boyfriend does hear about it all the time about how I have nothing to do and this and that. But I have been trying to keep myself busy with all the side projects that I do. I mean, if they knew about that they probably would not

be too impressed that I am using their work time to co-ordinate some of those – like my volunteer projects and things like that. But I mean, the attitude here is if you get your work done, no one is going to hound on you about whatever. (25, full time project manager at a global communications firm)

Rae's short mention of her partner in this excerpt is just one from across her longer narrative, where she tells me that they are a team, taking turns supporting each other both financially and emotionally. Most partners of participants were encouraging of participants' careers, like Rae's 50/50 arrangement with her partner, although this was often tested around issues of childcare or relocation. Beyond connecting work to her life at home with her partner, Rae's use of work time for volunteer projects as a way to deal with the frustration and personal futility she feels raises an important issue of the ability of a worker's agency to make change. Cumber et al. (2010; via Coe, 2013) make use of Katz's (2004) framework of resilience, reworking and resistance to think through what effect individual workers can have. Rae's action had a positive effect on her well-being, but as it is a secret use of her work time it is a valuable coping strategy rather than outright resistance. What it does achieve is a sense of meaningful work for Rae, within a wider system constraining her action (Lyons et al., 2012). A sense of feeling underemployed was prevalent across the interviews and survey, where young women reported they could not

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get the hours they wanted or more often felt they were overqualified for the work they were doing. Underemployment was more frequently reported than unemployment, with Helen telling me she was "so scared of being without a job that I take on like three awful jobs at a time". Feeling cynical about the job market, yet still trying to find meaningful work was common, where blame for underemployment shifted from "maybe we expect too much" to "a shitty labour market" within the same narrative (Helen). Here the stereotype of the entitled millennial comes up against the reality of a labour market that is producing fewer and fewer skilled, secure, full time jobs (Twenge, 2010). Rae's partner and Helen's friends help them to reject stereotypes and support their efforts to find meaning in their working lives. In traditional measures of precarity, perceived underemployment is not often part of the picture yet it has a sustained emotional impact on young workers when they feel that are not valued at work.

Conclusion: Thinking through precariousness and the social self

Using millennial women's narratives of insecurity at work, this article has aimed to expand our understanding of precarity through attention to interdependency and relational autonomy. In Coe and Jordhus-Lier's (2011: 11) progress report on labour geographies, focusing on the collective organization of workers, they state: "Agency is always relational, and never completely autonomous". I have echoed this call for a relational understanding of agency in our working lives, but rather than focusing on 'labour and its political organizations' my interest is on young women's experiences of work and how they position work in their own lives, delving into the affective relationships of workers to inform my theorizing of the social self. This is important as most millennials are not members of unions – rates of unionization for workers under 30 in Canada were 15.1% for those with post-secondary education and 28.2% for those without in 2011 (Foster, 2012). My purpose here was to use an affective register of precarity, or feeling precarious, to reveal and expose our connections to others, focusing on how young women make sense of (and attempt to mitigate) feeling precarious (see Castree, 2007 for call to connect

work to social life). There is scope to expand this inquiry beyond my focus on personal ties, as young workers often have other associational ties, though volunteering, education or other personal projects.

This article has used Butler's linkage of precariousness and interdependency to examine millennial women's experience of work and the connections between work and social life. I have argued that in order to 'theorize worker agency effectively' (Coe, 2013), we need to recognize the power of the affective realm – that feeling precarious has real consequences in the labour market (and for politics Neilson and Rossiter, 2005). Feeling insecure can mean you stay in a job you are over qualified for, never even try to apply for work because you assume failure, or stay in a job you do not really like because you fear being unemployed. For many of the participants of Working Lives, feelings of precarity invade and impact experiences of employment that are objectively secure. Moreover, this attention to feeling precarious also develops the emerging literature on employment scarring (Clark et al., 2001). This work is mostly quantitative (although see Bynner, 2013), even when investigating psychological effects of un(der)employment. While quantitative studies might capture current or previous precarious employment, feeling underemployed or 'borrowing' friends' experiences are missing from the analysis. Precariousness as a concept is inherently affective, feeling insecure, but it can have tangible results in the labour market as we have seen above – from Ella going back to school before trying to get a job in her field, to Cheryl's fear of past unemployment keeping her in a job she does not care for.

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Developing an understanding of the impact of subjective experiences of precariousness as well as what it means to think of the social self, where choices and actions are constituted through relations with others is critical. The four examples above link to the social self through partners, friends, parents and neighbourhood – each is a single example among the complex network of participants' social ties. By recognizing that (worker) agency is social, inherently connected to others rather than individualized, conceptual work on a relational understanding of autonomy demonstrates that young women's agential decisions, perceptions of and reactions to the labour market are shaped and informed by the experiences of those around them, as well as their past experiences and future expectations. This framework offers a useful conceptual lens for labour geographies, between claims of a rational (independent) actor or the collective voice of a union, adding another way of thinking through the complexity of work. For feminist economic geography, while interdependence has featured in various ways, exploring it alongside young women's attempts to mitigate feeling precarious is revealing; the theory of relational autonomy offers helpful language for getting at millennial women's choices, experiences and expectations in a way that is constitutively social.

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Note

1. Underemployment in Canada is measured by involuntary part time hours, not people experiencing underemployment, greatly underestimating statistics and masking high underemployment for particular groups, including women and young people (Canadian Labour Congress, 2014).

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