

Work Futures Research Group

2021 New Year Updates

Precarity in Times of Covid

Some members of the Work Futures Research Group have a long-term interest in precarious work, its wider social context and consequences. This work has continued to progress during the distinctly precarious times of 2020.

Phil Mignot and **Ricky Gee** are examining precarity as an existential phenomenon. Their 2020 book chapter applies this lens to longitudinal case studies of the transitional experiences of a group of graduates (Mignot, P. & Gee, R. 2020. 'Precarity as an existential phenomenon within a post-industrial labour market'. In: Scandrett, E., ed. *Public Sociology as Educational Practice: Challenges, Dialogues and Counterpublics*. Policy Press: The University of Bristol).

Vanessa Dodd is currently working on a book chapter for *Decent Work: challenges and opportunities* to be published in 2021 detailing the importance of a psychological perspective on decent work, the development of the Decent Work Scale and the findings of cross-cultural scale validation project with eight partner countries. Vanessa was part of the project team which conducted the initial validation study in the United Kingdom which was published in 2019 in a special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*.

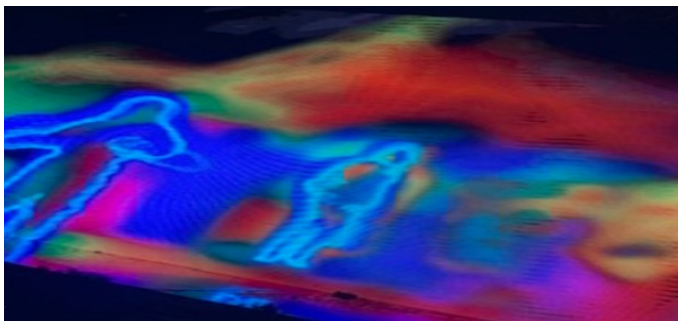


Image from [Discover Society](#).

Meanwhile **Verity Aiken** applied her expertise as a sociologist of education to explore the differential

'positions of risk' associated with precarity, which are unevenly distributed across society. Her recent article uses these ideas to consider the difference that social class makes for the exposure of teachers and students during the COVID-19 pandemic ([Aiken, V. 2020. 'Why COVID-19 is changing our perceptions of social class and risk' *Discover Society* 22 May 2020](#)).

Continuing the application of the group's work to the new challenges presented by the pandemic, **Tom Vickers** and **Sharon Hutchings** wrote an article drawing together local research on the experiences of agency workers and private hire and taxi drivers, to consider the consequences of precarious work for infection and the likely consequences of the pandemic for the further growth of precarious work (Vickers, T. & Hutchings, S. 2020. 'Precarity, precarious work and COVID-19: insights from Nottingham' *Discover Society* 27 July). This work was cited in the *Financial Times*.



Nearly 300 workers at Northampton's Greencore factory tested positive for coronavirus in August 2020. [Google Street](#)

Responding to one of the largest COVID outbreaks to date, among the workforce at the Greencore sandwich factory in Northampton, **Tom Vickers** co-authored an article with Helen Shipton from Nottingham Business School and Wilson Wong from the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development ([Vickers, T., Shipton, H. & Wong, W. 2020. 'Greencore factory: timeline of a coronavirus outbreak shows staff must be listened to'](#)

[The Conversation 11 September 2020](#)). The article made the case for listening to workers and their trade unions to improve health and safety, and was used by Shadow Secretary for Health and Social Care Justin Madders when preparing his [contributions to the Delegated Legislation Committee](#).

Irene Zempi has continued her work examining the impact of hate crime, in and beyond the workplace, in deepening conditions of precarity for some groups. Her recent work included a paper at the Biennial Conference of International Network of Hate Studies (watch [here](#)), and a journal article (Knight, V. & Zempi, I. 2020. 'Embracing the emotional turn: Responding to researcher emotion in qualitative research', *Emotions & Society*). In December 2020 she presented oral evidence to the Law Commission Review of Hate Crime Legislation for England and Wales.

Understanding informal work during Covid-19 – a new AHRC funded study

NTU colleagues from Work, Informalisation and place Research Centre secured funding to work with the Modern Slavery Centre for Policy and Evidence to understand the links between informal work, Covid-19 and modern slavery. This six-month project will investigate informality across three sectors in three geographic regions of the UK to provide a more informed picture of labour exploitation and abuse. The team led by Professor Ian Clark and supported by Dr James Hunter and **Rich Pickford** will map and classify locations of informal businesses and create predictive assessments of risk across these sectors. For more information [visit their webpage](#) or [twitter account](#).

Digital Transformations in Work

Another stream of the group's activity is exploring transformations in working lives associated with digital technologies. Our first two case studies are well underway, focusing on two companies that are emblematic of these changes: Uber and Amazon.

Uber

In the summer of 2020 **Tom Vickers**, **David Dahill** and **Dominic Holland** co-authored a report on the first two years of our research concerning the impact of digital platforms on working conditions for private hire and Hackney taxi drivers, funded under NTU's Sustainable Futures strategic research priority (Vickers, T. Dahill, D. & Holland, D. with King, D., Hutchings, S., Garius, L. & Rendall, J. 2020. [Decent and good work in the platform economy: private hire and taxi work in Nottingham](#)).



Image by [Free-Photos](#) from [Pixabay](#).

The report identified widespread economic insecurity among drivers and made recommendations for urgent action by central government and local authorities to improve regulation and support for drivers. The findings contributed to an academic journal article (Clark, I., Lawton, C., Stevenson, C., Vickers, T. & Dahill, D. 2020. 'A 'place-based' approach to work and employment: The end of reciprocity for ordinary working families and 'giggers' in a place', *Economic & Industrial Democracy*), and were further disseminated to drivers, trade unions, private hire and taxi operators and policy makers, through articles published in [LocalGov.co.uk](#), [Private Hire & Taxi Monthly](#), [East Midlands Business Link](#), [Discover Society](#), [The Conversation](#), [Nottingham Post](#), and [Futures of Work](#).

These findings informed a [written submission](#) to a Department for Transport inquiry concerning the implications of the Coronavirus for transport, co-authored with **Richard Pickford**. The report has already

received notes of thanks from licensing officers and councillors at local authorities covering Nottingham, Leicester, Wigan, Wiltshire, South Hams, Staffordshire Moorlands, Newcastle, Runnymede, Winchester, Northumberland, and Middlesbrough, and from the United Private Hire Drivers union. To continue these discussions a policy seminar is being planned, to coincide with an expected government consultation.



Image by [Tumisu](#) from [Pixabay](#).

Amazon

Over the last nine months, **Dominic Holland** and **Tom Vickers** have been investigating working conditions within Amazon's e-commerce operations through an extensive review of published literature (both online and offline, academic and non-academic) and through interviews with trade union officials. The outcome of this research is a report, *Unfulfilled – Work, Labour and Employment in Amazon's Fulfilment Centres in the Twenty-First Century*, which is intended to be a significant contribution to our understanding of work, labour and employment in Amazon's fulfilment centres across the world.

The researchers found that

- the process of work within Amazon's fulfilment centres is *socially complex, increasingly mechanised, and highly digitised*;
- the employment of workers within Amazon's fulfilment centres is *increasingly precarious*;
- the working conditions inside Amazon's fulfilment centres are *dehumanizing*.

They concluded that Amazon's current business model

is incompatible with the maintenance of the wellbeing of the workers on which the process of fulfilment depends.

The findings from the research are informing the production of a series of briefing papers for trade unions, health and safety inspectors and government policy makers, as well as a co-authored article for *New Technology, Work and Employment* on the impact of digitisation on the process of work.

Work Practices for the Future

Another important area of activity for the group concerns the innovation of work practices in specialist fields including social work, youth work, emergency services, and teaching, and legal advice work. Recent publications in this area include:

- [Gee, R. 2020. Informal Education as a Derridean Gift: a Deconstructive Reading of the Principles Guiding Youth Work Practice Within Neoliberal Policy Regimes. *Journal of Applied Youth Studies*.](#)
- [Gee, R. & Barnard, A. 2020. Reflective practice via the lens of the life career and paradox: a contemplation of being and becoming a social worker, *Reflective Practice*, 21:2, 210-221.](#)
- [Hutchings, S. & Lyons-Lewis, A. 2020. Reflections on five years of critical service learning: is it critical or are we social justice dreamers? In: Scandrett, E., ed. *Public Sociology as Educational Practice: Challenges, Dialogues and Counterpublics*. Bristol: Bristol UP.](#)

From January 2021 members of the Work Futures Research Group will embark on a new project concerning innovation in immigration advice work, as part of a £30,200, five-year evaluation contract with the Hope Project legal service, led by **Tom Vickers** in collaboration with Helen O'Nions in NTU's Law School and Blerina Kellezi in the Department of Psychology.

Becoming a School Governor as a Social Practice

In a new and emerging area of work, **Mark Axler** is investigating the practices of school governors, the largest volunteer group in the UK, who number approximately 370,000 governors in 29,000 schools. His work builds on organisational socialisation, social practice theory of learning and school governance literatures. The overall outcome will be a critical theory of learning in practice.



Image by [Gerd Altmann](#) from [Pixabay](#).

Pre-pandemic, socialisation of governors as a reciprocal, ongoing process of learning everyday activity in practice hardly featured in the literature on school governance and school governors. Thus, little was known about how school governors are changed and change as they partake in their own government.

Since March 2020 school governing bodies have been reacting to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis by transitioning the practice of governing and governing practices online. School governors now experience a different form of participation and interaction, learning and knowing-in-practice (Gherardi, 2006) to those defined by the DfE Competency Framework (2017) and

the DfE Governance Handbook (2020).

A report by the National Governance Association and Ofsted, *Governing in unprecedented times* (NGA-Ofsted, 2020), has called for further research into the experience of school governors in virtual settings. This crisis emphasises that socialisation and situated learning in practice are complex, messy and problematic. It will be of interest to understand how this crisis mediates governance practices and a 'new normal' emerges through the lived experiences of school governors' social and power relations. These changed circumstances also raise the question of what factors promote and prevent participation in this context?

Mark is exploring possible ways to offer new insights into school governors learning the ropes (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) while sailing the boat in the new normal (Ahlstrom, et al., 2020) environment, through a research assemblage (Fox and Aldred, 2014). This will explore socialisation of school governors in relation to the progressive entanglement (Gherardi, 2017) of social, material practice in experiences, events, activity, meaning, learning and knowing. How situated learning changes and is changed can be examined through factors that allow and inhibit the new normal (Ahlstrom, et al., 2020).

Lastly, some fiction! A recent short story by **Tom Vickers**, drawing on empirical research, invites us to imagine alternative possibilities for the future of care work (Vickers, T. 2020. 'Caring Times', *So Fi Zine* 8).

Based in the Department of Social and Political Sciences and with membership drawn from across the School of Social Sciences at NTU, the Work Futures Research Group examines the social, economic, political, and organisational contexts in which work takes place and connects the study of work to the development of innovative work practices and healthy workplaces. This newsletter presents a selection of the group's work submitted by members. For more information see: <https://bit.ly/NTUWorkFutures>. To join the Work Futures mailing list email tom.vickers@ntu.ac.uk.

Core members:

David Dahill
Vanessa Dodd
Ricky Gee
Dominic Holland
Sharon Hutchings

Phil Mignot
Stefanie Petschick
James Pike
Tom Vickers
Irene Zempi

Associate members:

Verity Aiken
Mark Axler
Thom Baguley
Andrew Clapham
Rowena Hill

Maria Karanika-Murray
Stephanie King
Craig Lundy
Jodie Pennacchia
Richard Pickford
Chris Rolph
Edward Wright