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Living and working on the edge: 'Place precarity' and the experiences of male manual workers in a U.K. seaside town

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Abstract

Based on an ethnographic study of male manual workers in Blackpool, a large seaside town in the United Kingdom, and drawing on Bourdieu as a theoretical frame, this article explores the role of place in understanding conditions and experiences of precarity. With higher than average levels of deprivation, seaside towns have experienced particular employment challenges where precariousness is likely to be at the forefront of male manual workers' labour market condition. Results highlight the significance of the interplay between place, employment prospects, geographical 'constriction' and dispositions of 'provisionality,' which, together, produce 'uneven geographies' of labour. We develop the concept of 'place precarity' to show how precarity is fundamentally rooted in the spatial context and to capture how conditions and experiences of precarity interact with localised employment conditions.

KEYWORDS

Blackpool, class, manual work, place, precarity

1 | INTRODUCTION

Informed by the theoretical insights from Bourdieu (1977, 1990), this article explores the experiences of male manual workers in Blackpool, a large seaside town in the United Kingdom. Specifically, it focusses on how members of this group, largely overlooked within public policy and the academy, encounter precarity and how place, as a materialisation of social relations and practices (Massey, 1984, 1995), is implicated in their employment experiences. Our rationale for focusing on this group reflects a recognition that, in contrast to the career progression and spatial mobility of the middle class, members of the white, male working class in the United Kingdom have encountered particular disadvantage—'left behind' by global forces, the erosion of secure, low skilled work and inward migration, creating greater competition for jobs (McDowell, 2003; McDowell & Harris, 2019; Skeggs, 2004). At the same time, in a cultural context characterised by a rhetoric of individual responsibility, there has been a tendency to perceive members of this group as liable for their own detrimental

positioning (McDowell, Bonner-Thompson, & Harris, 2020; Skeggs, 2004), remaining largely invisible in terms of policy and academic research (McDowell & Bonner-Thompson, 2020).

Here, little is known about the role of place, as physical locality as well as a constellation of opportunities, processes and relationships (Massey, 2005), in shaping both the conditions and the 'lived experiences' of precarity (Waite, 2009). This is in a context where, as with many seaside towns that have suffered long term decline, precariousness is likely to be at the forefront of their labour market condition. We draw on Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) Theory of Practice as a useful frame to highlight how wider contextual conditions (e.g., geographic situation and employment prospects) combine with specific socio-economic setting to generate 'ways of being' and identity formations (i.e., *habitus*), which have significance for labour market experience. As Wenham (2020) argues, looking at geographies of exclusion in seaside towns, there is a need to explore material inequalities of particular localities alongside subjectivities in the form of meanings, perceptions and experiences. Here, Bourdieu can provide powerful insight into

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how the dynamics and conditions of the 'field'—seen as the setting in which agents and their social positions are located—can generate perceptions and action, potentially reinforcing precarious experiences and conditions.

Our choice of location reflects a widening gap between coastal areas and the rest of the United Kingdom with seaside towns identified by a parliamentary select committee as the 'least understood of Britain's "problem areas"' (House of Commons and Local Government Committee, 2007, p. 46). Situated in the north west of the United Kingdom and on the centre of the Fylde Coast, Blackpool has shared with other seaside towns a long-term decline in income levels and employment opportunities (ONS, 2013). As the most popular of all seaside destinations in the United Kingdom, as measured by visitor nights (*ibid*), Blackpool is at the same time within the top three most deprived U.K. coastal towns, with higher than average levels of deprivation in terms of income levels, employment opportunities, education/training and the 'living environment' (ONS, 2013). Additionally, it has one of the lowest levels of life expectancy in the United Kingdom (HoL, 2019). High levels of deprivation and the precarious nature of work and nonwork conditions partly define the town, making an analysis of how the social framework rooted in place impacts on the male working-class employment experience a critical inquiry.

Drawing on an ethnographic study of male manual workers in Blackpool, we investigate the significance of spatial context and, from Bourdieu's relational perspective, how this might interact with the employment experience. In so doing, we address the following questions. What spatial and nonspatial factors have shaped the employment paths of male manual workers in Blackpool? How is place, with its specific local and global relationalities, implicated in conditions and experiences of precarity in this context? We address a gap in the literature on the role of place in understandings of precarity (Banki, 2013; Waite, 2009), 'placing' precarity in a context where 'life worlds' are inflected with vulnerability. Based on our data, and combining place, precarity and Bourdieu's relationality, we develop an understanding of 'place precarity,' capturing the interplay between place, prospects, (im)mobilities and dispositions and demonstrating how, together, they produce 'uneven geographies' of labour.

Our article is structured as follows. We discuss key literatures on 'labour precarity,' highlighting subjective and objective dimensions, and demonstrate how Bourdieu's relational approach with its focus on the interrelationship between geographical, contextual conditions and subjective 'schemes of perception,' provides a useful frame for combining the two. We briefly describe the context of Blackpool as a disadvantaged seaside town and set out our method and our analysis. We present our data, oriented around the themes of employment prospects, geographical constriction and dispositions of provisionality, where the latter captures a 'habitus' based on insecurity, uncertainty and feelings of anxiety over the future. We generalise from this, in our Discussion and Conclusion, to develop an understanding of 'place precarity,' which incorporates place, prospects, (im)mobilities and dispositions, capturing a power dynamic of disadvantage.

2 | PRECARIOUS WORK

While the concept of precarity has eluded strict definition, it has often been associated with a state of vulnerability (Banki, 2013; Ettlinger, 2007), namely, a condition of openness to exploitation, harm or damage. Whereas some have seen precarity as a generalised and ubiquitous aspect of contemporary society, marked by uncertainty and contingency (Butler, 2006; Ettlinger, 2007), most of the literature has located it more specifically within the context of work—the latter forming our chosen orientation given our focus on manual labour. 'Labour precarity' is commonly associated with the insecurity and risk of 'non-standard' employment contracts. Thus, Rubery et al. define precarity as 'the absence of those aspects of the standard employment relationship (SER) that support the decommodification of labour' (Rubery, Grimshaw, Keizer, & Johnson, 2018, p. 510).

As such, precarity has become a central object of inquiry within the area of employment and work, seen as a defining feature of transformations in contemporary economic and social life (Masquelier, 2019; Standing, 2011). Marketisation and financialisation of the economy, which, in their broadest sense, encompass trade union retreat, withdrawal of welfare provisions, contracting out and flexible labour markets, have led to increased insecurity in terms of employment and working conditions (Standing, 2011). These transformations have had profound implications for an increasingly contingent, flexible and insecure employment relationship, described as a 'new norm' (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Rubery et al., 2018) that includes temporary, fixed term and zero hours contracts and/or 'bogus' self-employment, where risks are shifted from employers to employees.

While precarity can include higher paid workers struggling to find secure employment (e.g., in the information technology [IT] and the creative industries), precarious work, as Standing (2009) has pointed out, is generally characterised by weak access to skill development, lack of voice in the workplace, feelings of disposability, lack of protection, high levels of vulnerability to management control and limited access to social, economic or cultural capital (Alberti, Bessa, Hardy, Trappman, & Umney, 2018; Savage, 2015). This has involved a cultural shift, replacing a sense of collective accountability with individualized notions of personal responsibility (Kallenberg, 2012). For some workers, this may be a welcome development in that short, flexible contracts may be seen as desirable in certain contexts. For others, however, the 'ontological experience' (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008) is one of vulnerability and insecurity where working conditions and working lives are threatened by forces seemingly beyond individual control. Individualisation of risk and responsibility, the need to adopt entrepreneurial attitudes and conduct and the pressure to embrace vulnerability provide a fertile 'breeding ground' for fear of failure and for 'isolated and individualised subjects' (Lorey, 2015). While offering the promise of success, these trends at the same time involve a 'loss of grip' over the future and a feeling of lack of control, leaving the individual 'worn down' (McCormack & Salmenniemi, 2016). This experience of uncertainty insinuates into every sphere of life, affecting not just work but also health, housing and relationships.

From the above, we can see that precarity is closely associated with vulnerability. For Waite (2009), vulnerability forms an integral aspect of precarity, but precarity goes further in explicitly incorporating the significance of the institutional and political context in which it is produced. Vulnerability, while a core element of precarity, tends by contrast to focus on individual experiences so that, as Anderson (2007) argues, understandings of vulnerability in the context of work have tended to prioritise the individual rather than the structural context in which it occurs. Precarity therefore has both an objective and a subjective dimension in that it captures structural transformations, such as those involved in the drive to marketisation, and involves the deepest ontological experience of vulnerability. With a focus on the employment experience, we respond to calls (e.g., Banki, 2013; Waite, 2009) for greater attention to the neglected role of place in generating and sustaining precarity. We therefore take a contextually sensitive approach, which focuses on conditions and experiences of precarity as above and which is inclusive of the socio-economic and cultural circumstances of place. As such, we incorporate subjective, objective and geographical dimensions and consider how they might interact.

3 | BOURDIEU, PLACE AND PRECARIETY

We draw on Bourdieu's Theory of Practice to capture the interplay between these dimensions. As Masquelier (2019) argues, through a focus on how material conditions of existence generate particular dispositions and 'schemes of perception,' the theory helps to combine the objective and subjective into an analysis of the precarious experience, potentially highlighting how social groups are differentially exposed to precarity's conditions and consequences. From this perspective, precarity has origins in material structures and conditions that simultaneously engender categories of thought, perceptions and action (Bourdieu, 1990).

In more general terms, for Bourdieu, wider contextual conditions combine with socio-economic setting, captured in the concepts of 'social space' and the 'field,' to generate identity formations and dispositions, that is, *habitus*. Bourdieu sees social space as an abstract 'order of relations' (Bourdieu, 1996) through which social groups are formed and distributed—an arrangement of 'people, objects, tastes and dispositions' (Cresswell, 2002, p. 380). Social space can be understood as made up of an 'ensemble of sub-spaces' (Bourdieu, 2018, p. 109) or overlapping and hierarchically positioned 'fields,' conceptualised as a system of objective relations, opportunity structures and cultural constraints that delineate the 'rules of the game.' This captures how individuals, armed with different forms of capital (e.g., 'cultural capital' in the form of qualification and skill), seek to further their position within the field. Together, this has significance for how individuals make sense of their experience and for a 'world view' that comes to be seen and accepted as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1991). Thus, in a mutually constitutive sense, the field comprises a network of positions and practices delineating a dynamic set of potentialities and capital distributions, whereas the *habitus* gives rise to the possible position taking open to that person

within the field, evaluating some positional forms as more desirable and/or more contestable than others.

The field of manual work for example has been associated with limited opportunities for progression, poor pay and insecure conditions (Simpson, Hughes, & Slutskaya, 2016), comprising a social space that is partly marked by disadvantage. This generates a particular set of dispositions and 'ways of seeing.' Individual behaviour must therefore be analysed and understood within the specifics of the field and in terms of the competition over resources necessary for securing advantage within it. Bourdieu accordingly addresses meanings, perspectives and values (the *habitus*) as well as contextual issues in that the *habitus* is continually adjusted to the current field. Experiences of precarity are on this basis differentiated according to interlocking field conditions that make up a social space, possession of capital and social positioning within that domain.

Although Bourdieu did not put place central to his analysis, his later work (Bourdieu, Accardo, & Emanuel, 1999) did give recognition to the interplay between social space, fields and physical space. Social space is seen to delineate social relationships through, in part, their spatial organisation in that bodies are situated in a site, or location, as part of lived, concrete experience. These sites, too, stand in relation to each other so that the 'invisible set of relationships' (Bourdieu, 1996, 2018) of social space as well as the structured spaces of positions that comprise the 'field' can retranslate into physical space in the form of distributional arrangements of agents, positions, properties and locations. Thus, Blackpool can be seen to be characterised by a particular arrangement of social relations and by an objective set of positions and positionalities, which are hierarchically situated in relation to other locations. On this basis, in line with Bourdieu's later work, we can delineate both social space and fields as having a geographical component where characteristics of place can be incorporated into his understanding of their particular arrangements and conditions.

Here, literature from cultural geography goes beyond seeing place solely in terms of physical structure and as mere 'backdrop' to action (Keenoy & Oswick, 2004), recognising that the social and the cultural are geographically constructed. Places are seen as dynamic and inter-relational, connected often unequally to other (local and global) places and socially constructed on the basis of unequal relations of power (Cresswell, 2015). In this respect, as Massey (1984) has argued, the uniqueness of place can be understood as the expression of a particular mix of geographical and social relations that incorporates individuals' embodied relationship with the world. Together, these create varied and evolving opportunities, relationships and resources (Massey, 2005), helping to shape experiences of privilege and vulnerability through, for example, the constitutive elements of movements and of daily routines.

Place acts as a key reference point in people's lives, and here, researchers have highlighted the dynamic interplay between place and class position (e.g., Massey, 1984; Skeggs, 2004). These processes are both shaped by and themselves shape individual lives and identities (McDowell, 2004), underpinning social relations of movement, constriction, inclusion and exclusion (Lefebvre, 1991; McDowell, 2004). With clear implications for how precarity might be locally encountered, attention has been drawn to the ways in which

class position might mean a different relationship with place (Savage, Bagnall, & Longhurst, 2005). Here, Skeggs (2004) has pointed to a high level of localism and a 'geographical fixidity' among members of the working class. This suggests that there are likely to be geographical variations in conditions of precarity and how they may interact with contextually based situations of employment.

Despite the fundamental importance given to place as the basis of human interaction and experience (Malpas, 1999), the role of place in creating and maintaining conditions of precarity has not been a central focus of inquiry. Instead, literature has concentrated on precarity as an aspect of the employment condition, potentially overlooking the interaction with other key dimensions such as place (Banki, 2013; Findlay, 2005; Waite, 2009). As Findlay (2005) points out, place is likely to influence whether an individual or group, occupying hierarchically embedded positions relative to the political, cultural and economic context, feels secure or at risk. While some critical geographers have usefully highlighted experiences of precarity through the vulnerable residential status of some migrant groups (e.g., Banki, 2013; Waite, 2009), this has been more concerned with issues of geographical mobility and has not fully engaged with the role of place with its unique combination of geographical, socio-economic and cultural relations, as a fundamental aspect of the precarious experience. Drawing on the above literature on place and using Bourdieu's relational approach as a theoretical lens, we address this gap by developing from our data an understanding of 'place precarity.' This captures contextual, geographical conditions of precarity as well as ontological experiences of vulnerability. Further, it offers a more comprehensive account of the role of place in lived experience by combining the physical (e.g., geography and employment structure), the relational (the specific constellation of opportunities, processes and relationships) and the dispositional as these spatial structures, relations and conditions 'enter our being.' Following Waite (2009), and incorporating the above, this suggests that the inclusion of a 'geographical imagination' has potential to enhance our understanding of the precarious experience and how it may be produced.

4 | CONTEXT AND METHOD

Although the seaside economy is not a uniform entity (the U.K. coastal town of Brighton, for example, has conformed to a model of reinvention, embracing the new digital era within a diverse knowledge economy), other resorts—particularly those with an over-reliance on tourism—have found themselves on the economic and social periphery (Centre for Social Justice, 2013; HoL, 2019). The spatial unevenness in the economic performance of resorts highlights the complexity of their social geography (Argawal & Brunt, 2006; Argawal, Jakes, Essex, Page, & Mowforth, 2018). Here, singling them out from deprived, inland regions, Argawal and Brunt (2006) highlight some problems common to struggling seaside towns, indicative of 'multiple deprivations,' including a long-term decline in tourism, fishing and other port activities; peripheral geographical positioning and poor transport connectivity that can create a barrier to labour market

accessibility; population transience accompanied by a high proportion of housings of multiple occupancy (HMOs); and a high proportion of older, retired, white populations with limited qualifications. Societal effects can include a 'geography of exclusion' with a lack of social mobility for younger people in coastal communities (Wenham, 2020) as well as endemic uncertainty over future prospects based on limited work opportunities (McDowell & Bonner-Thompson, 2020). This and other work (e.g., McDowell et al., 2020) point to the challenges faced by long-term residents of coastal communities in the United Kingdom in a context where there are few opportunities for secure work. This can pose specific problems for less skilled men. As McDowell and Bonner-Thompson (2020) found, men can suffer particular disadvantage in that they are often seen as less eligible than women in terms of skills and aptitude for the customer-facing service employment that can dominate these towns.

We add to this literature by exploring manifestations and experiences of precarity among male manual workers in Blackpool. Our choice of location reflects Blackpool's status as a large seaside resort, with a high dependence on seasonal work and with the biggest concentration of seaside tourism jobs in the United Kingdom, much of which has suffered a long-term decline over the years (Beatty, Fothergill, & Gore, 2014). Together with Margate and Hastings on the South Coast, it is within the top three most deprived English seaside resorts (Argawal et al., 2018). Blackpool is renowned as the world's first working class holiday resort and centre of entertainment. Its popularity as a seaside holiday destination historically dates to Victorian times when workers from the industrial North began to frequent the area for day trips and soon after, for week 'staycations' (Edensor & Millington, 2018). Today, Blackpool is host to a pleasure beach, one of the most popular English attractions, 'conventional' theatres, three piers, ballrooms, the 19th-century tower, amusement arcades and the sandcastle leisure centre. Often associated with 'vulgarity and excess,' and although tourism has declined over the years, Blackpool still plays host to approximately 17 million people annually in their quest to experience the vibrancy of entertainment on offer complemented by cheap accommodation in the many hotels that line the seafront (Figures 1 and 2).

Blackpool benefits from repeat custom, particularly from older tourists and day trippers, with many drawn back to the town and its traditions (Edensor & Millington, 2013). Nevertheless, the seaside town in the North West of England is in one of the most deprived boroughs in the United Kingdom. Blackpool contains the seventh largest proportion of highly deprived neighbourhoods (Gov.uk, 2019), with 38.3% of the district positioned within the most highly deprived index and with the highest proportion of its neighbourhoods in the most deprived 1% nationally (Gov.uk, 2019). A walk from the station to the seafront tends to confirm this status. This is to pass small charity shops, empty bars and betting establishments as pedestrians and cars navigate the contra-flow systems from the new tramway under construction. Going towards the seafront, this leads to a rather 'tired' shopping centre, sparsely populated in midwinter, and a modest 1980s shopping mall behind the iconic Winter Gardens, a Victorian building which is host to various shows and events (Figure 3).



FIGURE 1 A large hotel on the seafront



FIGURE 2 Central pier



FIGURE 3 The main shopping street on a rainy day, looking towards the sea

High levels of deprivation in the area pose particular challenges with regard to health, teenage pregnancy and alcoholism among young people in comparison with their counterparts elsewhere in the United Kingdom, resulting in some of the lowest General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination results across the country. Nearly 15% of working age people has no educational qualifications (Department for Education, 2017). With below average economic activity rates (ONS, 2019a), partially explained by Blackpool being home to the United Kingdom's oldest average age population, the number of children living in income deprived households is just under one third (32.9%, ONS, 2019a). Health deprivation is a significant issue across generations, with a higher proportion of alcohol deaths in comparison with the rest of England (Public Health England, 2018), as well as excessive Class A drug misuse (CVS, 2013). The proportion of income and employment deprivation is joint highest in the country (Gov.uk, 2019). Although 37.3% of the working population resides in professional occupations (while still being lower than the North West average), a higher than average proportion (19.5%) occupy positions in 'elementary' jobs, that is, manual and low-level service work that are largely of a short term or seasonal variety (HoL, 2019). Unemployment from the decline in tourism-related industries is accordingly accompanied by underemployment, with no industry having taken the place of this sector (Centre for Social Justice, 2013).

Lower than average income levels (16.6% lower than the North West average, ONS, 2019b) and a much higher proportion of people claiming out of work benefits (23% against a national average of 12.5%, CVS, 2013) are reflected in a higher percentage of housing benefit claimants than the national average (Blackpool Council, 2019). Many guest houses were converted into flats and used for seasonal work, creating the need for temporary accommodation within the area, explaining a significantly higher proportion of privately rented accommodation (CVS, 2013). Positive associations from childhood holidays and a surfeit of cheap accommodation from declining tourism have attracted people with limited prospects and few alternatives, leading to Blackpool being dubbed the 'drop-out town,' exporting healthy skilled workers and importing the unskilled and the unemployed (O'Connor, 2017). On the fringes of the United Kingdom, Blackpool is accordingly challenged by a range of social, economic and health-related problems with, potentially, profound implications for conditions and experiences of precarity.

5 | METHOD

The research drew on an ethnographic approach, which lends itself to learning about everyday lives of particular groups and to an understanding of individual's meanings and experiences. This comprised semi-structured interviews supported by photographic representation. Two researchers conducted interviews and took over 50 photographs of the town, some included above, providing a rich visual depiction of Blackpool as a place of work, leisure and as seaside resort. Participants were contacted through advertisements placed in the

local newspaper, explaining we were a research team interested in the work experiences of male manual workers and asking for volunteers, through contact with leading hotels and through the local college that provides training and retraining schemes for the construction industry. Following all these leads led to 26 interviews, a number that is in line with other research on similar groups (e.g., Hughes, Simpson, Slutskaya, Simpson, & Hughes, 2016). We sought men of working age, resident in Blackpool and currently employed or seeking work in two main Office for National Statistics (ONS) occupational groups: 'elementary' occupations, that is, jobs requiring minimum level of formal qualifications or on the job training (e.g., cleaners, porters and refuse collectors) and 'craft and related trade workers,' which requires more specific knowledge and skills (e.g., bricklayers, carpenters and pipe fitters). In terms of age, half of the participants were in the 18–30 bracket with the remainder over 30 (six were over 60 and about to retire). Participants were employed or had recently been employed in various forms of manual work including building and construction (e.g., as roofer, scaffolder or 'general labourer'), decorating, gardening, warehouse work, portering and kitchen work. Three had held seasonal waiting jobs in local hotels and restaurants in the past, and one had brief experience of care work (but had left, preferring to work outside). Nine were in between jobs and seeking employment. All were white—a deliberate sampling strategy to reflect not only the demographics of the area (95% white) but also the tendency, referred to above, for white working class to be a particularly disadvantaged and neglected group (McDowell et al., 2020; Skeggs, 2004). Half of the participants had been born in Blackpool or had moved to the area as a child. The remainder had moved from Northern towns and cities (mainly Liverpool and parts of Scotland) within the last 10 years, often to join a family member.

Interviews, conducted between January 2019 and February 2020, took the form of a collaborative conversation (Banyard & Miller, 1998), which involves sympathetic listening and the sharing of ideas. Interviews lasted 45 min on average and were conducted in cafes in the centre of town, at the local college or, occasionally, at the place of work. Interviews explored three broad, interrelating themes relating to employment, place and leisure. Employment covered areas such as work history, aspirations and expectations, experiences of training and development, opportunities in Blackpool and challenges faced. Place incorporated themes such as family history in the area, perception of changes in Blackpool, feelings of place attachment and belonging, experiences of mobility and aspirations in terms of location. Leisure activities and networks were also discussed. Ethical guidelines were followed throughout. For example, participants were assured of confidentiality, were told that they could withdraw at any time and pseudonyms adopted. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in full.

In-depth analysis was conducted using a thematic approach (Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015), a method that has flexibility in that it is not tied to any particular epistemological or theoretical perspective. The first two authors conducted their own analysis of the data, which was then cross examined and discussed. Inductive analysis followed by 'mapping' onto Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the

interplay between habitus, capital and field was a key strategy. Familiarisation by reading and rereading the transcripts preceded initial coding, assisted by NVivo software, that summarised the 'surface meanings' of the data, which had been organised initially according to the main interview areas above. Broader patterns of meanings or themes were then sought across the data and the codes. Theory guided our analysis throughout. Thus, informed by Bourdieu's relational approach, themes were revisited and refined in an iterative manner, as analysis progressed, to check for coherence and clarity as organising concepts. Coding and final themes are summarised in Table 1 below:

To present an ethical ethnography (Butcher, 2013), reflexive engagement guided our interactions with participants. Here, we aimed to build a 'sympathetic relationship' and to convey an appreciation of manual workers' lives as they live them. As researchers in a professional occupation, our 'knowing practices' and modes of understanding were likely to be different from those of our participants. We therefore sought to ensure that participants were not only given appropriate space to express their ideas, thoughts and feelings but that we also gave their personal narratives deep and sympathetic attentiveness. Over a cup of coffee, we sought to create a relaxed atmosphere, often starting by sharing our first, positive impressions of Blackpool, which neither researcher had previously visited. This led to a conversation about the 'real' Blackpool from the greater knowledge and experience of participants, who often gave advice on places to visit and areas to avoid. This enabled participants to settle more readily into a conversation about their experiences living and working in the town.

6 | EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS AND GEOGRAPHICAL CONDITIONS OF THE FIELD

For Bourdieu (1990), 'fields' are overlapping contexts in which individuals, equipped with different forms of capital, seek to maintain or advance their place in a network of unfolding positions. Embedded within a set of power relations and potentially encompassing local employment prospects and other 'spatial' conditions, fields offer a dynamic set of potentialities and options for actions while others are foreclosed. Physical location, embedded within a set of local and global relations and with its particular economic and demographic conditions, therefore comes to express social location through, in part, opportunities presented (Bourdieu, 1996). Against this background, we highlight in this section the importance of localised employment prospects (the nature and type of work on offer, transport connectivity and levels of dependence on local work) as aspects of 'place precarity' and their significance for understanding how precarity is rooted in locality.

We have seen how Blackpool is characterised by an underrepresentation in high growth employment sectors such as professional, science and technology (Blackpool Council, 2019) and has a high proportion of low-quality, insecure and temporary work with the biggest single concentration of seasonal, tourist-related jobs in the

TABLE 1 Thematic coding

Code descriptors	Example supporting quote	Themes	Overarching theoretical concepts
Low quality local work Geographical inaccessibility Competition for jobs Limited opportunities and job choice Dependence on local work	‘there's low jobs anyway -not so many jobs as other places like Manchester’ ‘there's no use me travelling out of Blackpool for the work – the cost of it you know’ ‘people are holding onto their jobs, they're not changing’ ‘It's hard to find a job here in Blackpool or anything’ ‘I'd be happy with any job in Blackpool as long as I'm working’	Prospects	Field conditions
Limited formal qualifications Reliance on manual skills Difficulties accessing vocational training Family ties Limited personal (i.e., financial) resources	‘I got a GCSE at school and that was like it’ ‘I've no school credit – none of that nonsense’ ‘Building sites and stuff – that's all I've ever done. I can't do anything else really’ ‘You needed to get an apprenticeship and then you'd be going to college as well in block release type of situation, but I could not find an apprenticeship at all nowhere.’ ‘I could have had a job in a shipyard just like that but me dad didn't want to move did he from Blackpool’ ‘I wanted to be a fireman ... but I didn't have time to go to college because my girlfriend was pregnant, so I just had to start grafting straight away’	Geographical constriction	Cultural capital Cultural conditions of the ‘field’ Tight conditions of existence (a classed field condition)
Insecure work/limited ability to plan ahead Lack of faith in the future and constrained aspirations Resigned fatalism	‘Zero hours contracts, know what I mean? Because there's a lot of them going round at Blackpool at the moment’ ‘It'd just be nice to know that we've, that I've got a job, you know, for the next however many years of my life, I don't have to worry, I'm always going to have work, the family don't have to worry about anything.’ ‘Kind of given up – I'm just going to take what I can get at the minute’. ‘(The Job Centre said) it (workplacement) might lead to a job, the big word is might. It was never going to lead to a job.’	Provisionality	Field condition Classed habitus

United Kingdom (Beatty et al., 2014). Heavy investment in local regeneration (notably a rejuvenated promenade, tramway renewal and a £26-m investment in a hotel and conference centre) has led to some opportunities in construction, and work is available in bars, cafes and on the Pleasure Beach (an amusement and theme park on the South Shore) during the short summer season. However, jobs on offer are generally poorly paid and of a seasonal variety. As Ken commented wryly of opportunities in the area: ‘there's only low jobs anyway.’

In reflection of these geographically rooted ‘field conditions,’ participants had held a variety of manual jobs in the past (pot washing, rubbish collection, warehouse work, scaffolding, kitchen portering, labouring and hotel cleaning) and had endured periods of unemployment. With people increasingly ‘holding onto their jobs,’ competition for manual work is fierce, especially among a group with

characteristically low levels of qualifications (discussed further below) whose members have few options elsewhere. As Stuart commented fatalistically, ‘there's not so many jobs here ... and plus there's being in a trade. A trade's even harder to get a job in Blackpool because that's all everyone goes for.’

Poor transport connectivity is a further factor behind a high level of competition for local work. There are no direct rail routes out of Blackpool to larger conurbations such as Manchester or Liverpool. Instead, passengers must change at Preston, the administrative centre for Lancashire with its own university and where opportunities for work are seemingly higher—a point acknowledged by warehouse worker George: ‘most of the jobs are in Preston. I only had one job in Blackpool, Tesco job that's it.’ However, with the majority of suitable jobs only offering the minimum wage, costs and time of travel prohibit many from looking for or accepting work in that area. As a typical

experience, Ray had considered work in a Preston based transport firm cleaning buses:

I've got the train at the back of my flat, and can get down, but it's going to cost me, you know, it'll cost a bit like. I mean, there's no good me travelling outside Blackpool for work, the cost of it ... it's costing me too much money.

Finding local work in Blackpool was a preoccupation for all participants, and given the few jobs available, staying employed was a key goal. As John admitted, having experienced lengthy bouts of unemployment, 'I'd be happy with any job as long as I'm working.' Matt, a bricklayer, expressed a similar sentiment: 'You know, you've just got to take anything, haven't you?' Ryan, a young man with no qualifications, was trying to get back into work after leaving a job as a cleaner in a hotel and had a series of unpaid placements under the job placement scheme, with little prospects of a paid job:

Since then it's just been work placements and stuff, yeah. It's just been unpaid work placements just to show what I can do and try to be kept on, but still no joy.

Taken together, employment within the locality is a key priority where, in this context, employment prospects and employment routes are constrained. This reflects the vulnerable social positioning of male manual workers in Blackpool as well as employment prospects that are grounded in the conditions of the 'field,' characterised by low wages, seasonality, poor transport connectivity and heavy competition for manual work, where finding and maintaining employment form a key aspirational focus and challenge. These conditions and experiences of precarity can therefore be seen to be rooted in place, comprising a 'place precarity' through uncertain localised employment prospects. As Bourdieu argues (1997, 1990) and as our data show, these prospects are largely dependent on the objective sets of relations that characterise the field and individuals' social positioning within that terrain. Against the 'inherited background' of Blackpool, and as discussed further below, we can see how locational and socio-economic conditions combine to produce 'uneven geographies' of work experience.

7 | GEOGRAPHICAL CONSTRICTION: LOCALISM, IMMOBILITY AND PLACE DEPENDENCE

For Bourdieu (Bourdieu et al., 1999), and as exemplified above, place comprises a collection of resources and conditions of engagement with the world. These conditions depend in part on the possession of capital as individuals seek advantage according to the field's 'rules of the game.' Here, Bourdieu (2018) highlights how, through the possession of capital such as qualifications and skills, some individuals are

more able than others to make spatial choices as evidenced by the geographical and social movements commonly associated with the middle-class career as well as the localism that is often associated with working class lives (Skeggs, 2004). The heavy reliance on local work outlined above has implications for possibilities and experiences of mobility, helping in this context to further underpin a place dependence and to create a power dynamic based on 'geographical constriction' that, we suggest, additionally defines a 'place precarity.'

This place dependence is exacerbated by limited 'cultural capital' in the form of low qualification levels that restrict employment to manual work in the area, as well as by family ties and by ongoing and pressing preoccupations with 'making ends meet.' In terms of the former, few participants had more than one or two GCSEs on leaving school, and many struggled with the IT skills increasingly demanded in the job application process. Heavy reliance was placed on vocational training as a means of entry into and progression within the local manual labour market. Many younger participants had gone from school to start courses in painting and decorating, bricklaying and catering, whereas some older participants had, through the further education college, sought to gain or to update their Construction Skills and Certificate Scheme (CSCS) card that is a requisite for employment in the U.K. building trade. Despite a strong desire for progression ('I want to be high up there' in Bob's words below), the path to course completion or to employment was not an easy one, and stories of education and training were beset with practical difficulties, particularly around the work demands and the lack of apprenticeship positions.

... the spot was gone for bricklaying, it was full up, and then I chose painting and decorating because there was a spot open. I fell in love with that. Did that for three years to get my Level 1, 2 and 3, then after that I thought I want to be a professional in something, I want to be high up there. I went on my HNC course, passed the first year, but life got in the way the second year so I failed that, and the workload was just constant, so I just couldn't keep up with it (Bob, painter and decorator).

I signed on for electrical installations. That was a year course ... Really loved it. Really enjoyed it. Come out with my qualifications and stuff, and then there was a Level 3 as well. So Level 3 you needed to get an apprenticeship and then you'd be going to college as well in block release type of situation, but I could not find an apprenticeship at all nowhere (Tim, unemployed).

Aspirations to progress in a particular trade and to gain the relevant qualifications could be further thwarted by tight conditions of existence, where, as Charlesworth (2000) points out drawing on Bourdieu, experience of place is intertwined with the experience of coping and seeking to resolve the challenges place imposes (limited work opportunities, oversubscribed vocational courses and lack of

apprenticeship places). In a context where necessity forms the structuring circumstance of working-class lives, this can interfere with ambitions and lead to the closure of possibility:

I wanted to be a fireman ... but I didn't have time to go to college because my girlfriend was pregnant, so I just had to start grafting straight away (Neil, roofer).

As a recent report on seaside towns has noted (HoL, 2019), those with higher qualifications tend to move away from Blackpool, leaving behind a pool of less skilled workers who are tied, through necessity and lack of realistic opportunities elsewhere, to the immediate locality. Furthermore, as the same report argued, the nature of jobs available in Blackpool (largely seasonal and low paid work) as well as a lack of higher education provision in the area tends to suppress the understanding that school leaving or higher level qualifications are important. This can combine with conditions of necessity to limit mobility and access to other resources (Atkinson, Roberts, & Savage, 2012) including vocational training as exemplified by the experiences above. While the employing organizations within the middle-class career can offer options, support and resources for personal progression, such as prospects for mobility with its associated 'broadening' and developmental potential, manual work is nearly always rooted in one area. Thus, Tony would move out of Blackpool 'immediately' if he had the security of a 'decent job' and 'guaranteed work,' and Thomas, a gardener, imagined, as a seemingly unattainable 'ideal,' the potential for a nationally located organisation to offer possibilities for mobility:

Yeah, there might be companies that, a company that is country wide, and say 'Alright, go here, go there' ideal I think that would because it would help me get and out and see things.

Family ties, while a source of ontological security ('So it's like I've got a bit of family here ... I feel comfortable living here'), added to these conditions of geographical constriction, symptomatic in part of a cultural expectation that adult children remain close to family members in their quest for work. This could lead to the surrendering of opportunities. Les explained regretfully 'I could have had a job in a shipyard just like that,' but family ties interfered, and the opportunity was foregone: 'me dad didn't want to move did he from Blackpool.' Cultural conditions that supported proximity to family roots in the area emerged as a form of entrapment and constraint. This was acknowledged by Josh, a young man struggling to find work and doing a freshers' course in construction, who had hopes to 'get away' and, in a compelling and thoughtful testimony given in full below, provides a role model for his daughter to explore her potential:

getting out it'd be something to, what am I looking for, it'd be a great way to teach my little girl that you don't just have to stick to where you are, if, so like if it's something that you're looking for, no, that's not right,

if it's something you enjoy doing then it's perfectly acceptable to go away from where you are and I think it's a good thing to try and teach her personally because to be honest the rest of, the majority of my family haven't, they've always, they've lived here and they stay here and so does her mum's family, so I think it'd be a good thing to show her that you don't have to stay where you are because there's so much opportunities, there's such a big world, such a big world and it's so much better to go out and see it and do stuff that you like out in the world.

From the above account, mobility is couched in developmental terms as a way of embracing challenge ('there's such a big world') and of exploring one's potential, breaking from imposed limits to pursue wider options. While belonging signifies an emotional attachment and engagement with locality, 'rootedness' is more territorial and captures a physical positioning that is experienced, in this context, as constriction and as a narrowing of opportunities that is obstructive to aspirations. Here, Bourdieu (1997, 1990) alerts us to how the horizons of place can offer a sense of scope that is inherited in part from the local culture, as exemplified by the tendency for Josh's family members to 'stick' to their known locality. In the context of a specific, localised employment structure outlined above, low capital formation and reliance on manual skills combine with limited financial resources and cultural expectations regarding family proximity to create a heavy dependence on a narrow field of work. As Josh's account powerfully illustrates, this leads potentially to strong feelings of constriction and an urge for 'getting out.'

Following the above, while others (e.g., Skeggs, 2004) have also pointed to a high level of localism among working class men, our data extend this understanding by pointing to key underlying factors contributing to this condition and by suggesting that this is not always a valued or welcome position. In Bourdieu's terms, this potentially highlights a power dynamic as those with capital make spatial choices through mobility whereas others are confined, through the processes and conditions outlined above, to a local dependence as they seek to resolve the challenges that place imposes. Whereas research on the geography of precarity has focussed in the main on the vulnerabilities of mobility in the form of the migrant experience (e.g., Banki, 2013; Waite, 2009), our data highlight a 'place precarity' associated with long-term residence and 'rootedness' in a single area. As our data show, this geographical constriction combines with the contours of place to narrow opportunities, creating vulnerabilities in terms of work experiences.

8 | DISPOSITIONS OF 'PROVISIONALITY'

As we have seen, broader socio-economic and political transformations have led to an increasingly contingent, flexible and insecure employment relationship, underpinning heightened levels of vulnerability (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Rubery et al., 2018) through the

prevalence of temporary, fixed term and zero hours contracts. Seasonal and temporary work that characterise much of the manual employment on offer in Blackpool—whether tied to the short tourist season or due to the temporary nature of much project based work in the building trade—meant that non-standard contracts associated with precarity were the norm for this group with, in addition, workers in painting, decorating and areas of construction largely engaged on a self-employed basis. As we show in this section, drawing on Bourdieu, these geographically rooted ‘field’ conditions generate particular dispositions (*habitus*) that relate, in part, to constrained aspirations, attitudes of resignation and feelings of anxiety over the future. As we argue, these dispositions form a further dimension to ‘place precarity’ and to an understanding of the role of place in experiences of precariousness in this context.

Uncertainty and lack of stability engendered by these circumstances meant that participants engaged with their present situation largely in ‘provisional’ terms. In other words, current circumstances were tolerated for the present, but their unsatisfactory nature meant that they were seen as conditional, and few participants felt settled. Inability to plan for a secure future and anxieties engendered through uncertainty of income and employment, impacting on family well-being and on the ability to acquire satisfactory housing in the area, were common themes. As Joe said in concise terms of his main priority and goal, ‘Yeah, stability I’d say, that’s what it’s about.’

Others echoed this sentiment. Thus, given the prevalence of zero hours contracts in Blackpool and the likelihood of being frequently in and out of work, Neil referred to the material difficulties faced to ‘feed yourself and feed your kids and heat the house, do you know what I mean?’ Tony highlighted feelings of powerlessness in planning a future whereas Ray expresses anxiety over his uncertain employment status:

Well, you get paid, but you’re just paid a basic minimum wage, aren’t you? So it is difficult, yeah, especially if you’re, you know, got rents and mortgages and stuff like that and they don’t know what hours you’re going to get and you can’t really plan their life around it (Tony, painter and decorator).

It’d just be nice to know that we’ve, that I’ve got a job, you know, for the next however many years of my life, I don’t have to worry, I’m always going to have work, the family don’t have to worry about anything (Ray, general labourer).

As Neilson and Rossiter (2008) have argued, precarity can be seen as a particular ‘ontological experience’ where working conditions and working lives are threatened by uncertainty, insecurity and by forces seemingly beyond individual control. In Bourdieu’s terms, the objective ‘space of relations’ and dynamic sets of potentialities of the field can enter the *habitus*, becoming internalised in the form of ‘dispositions’ and a particular ‘view of the world.’ This is partly grounded in place in terms of how, in our context, male manual workers apprehend

their situation and their experience of living and seeking to work in a struggling seaside town where much of the work on offer is seasonal and insecure. While family ties, memories of seaside holidays and positive experiences of living near the sea featured for many participants (fishing and coastal walking were common leisure activities), these were tempered by the realities of trying to keep in work. As Robert, currently in an out of work as a decorator, explained: ‘I love it down there (on the sea-front) and they (tourists) come here for the beach ‘n that, but for us living here, it’s dead-end,’ where ‘dead-end’ captures, potentially, the specific, peripheral geography of a coastal town as well as, despite its evident attractiveness, the extreme limitations of its employment potential.

Subjective feelings of vulnerability were commonly expressed in a lack of faith in the future and a resigned though reluctant acceptance of the current condition and where short-term goals, in relatively modest terms, were to secure the minimum basis for security and stability. Robert, currently looking for work, dreamed of house ownership, which he quickly scaled down, more realistically, to renting and the possibility of work: ‘I’d like to own my own house, if not my own house, like renting one, have a job’ This realistic acceptance and ‘taking for granted of the world’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 60) was captured by Les who spoke resignedly of yet another job placement scheme in Blackpool with its seemingly false promise of future employment: ‘(The Job Centre said) it might lead to a job, the big word is might. It was never going to lead to a job.’ Couched in provisional terms of an ‘ideal world,’ even modest goals were often seen as unattainable and out of reach:

In an ideal world, I’d either get a job that special, I want a specialist job, you know, a trade if possible, so I either get onto a good apprenticeship where they teach me and specialise, or potentially even can go back to college and specialise in something and get a good, you know, stable job ‘n’ that (Ryan, unemployed).

This highlights the provisional nature of manual workers’ lives in Blackpool, driven largely by the insecurity of their employment position where the present is ‘for the time being,’ lacking stability and a settled status but with little prospect for change. For Bourdieu (1991), internalisation of the structure of the social world can be seen as part of the ‘perceptual dispositions’ of a classed *habitus* where conditions of existence constrain a vision of the future—a form of ‘symbolic violence’ where a dominant world view (e.g., that places responsibility on the individual and that gives little value to manual work) is presented as legitimate. While there was an appreciation of the attractiveness of Blackpool as a coastal resort, precarious living and working conditions as outlined above help fashion subjective constructions that are based on a strong desire for security, on constrained aspirations and feelings of anxiety. These dispositions can therefore be seen to be partly grounded in place, both reflecting and comprising a ‘place precarity.’ As we suggest, together with poor employment prospects, lack of employment security and geographical constriction as above, ‘provisionality’ can both reflect and create precariousness through

dispositions that impose limits on aspirations and on a positive view of the future.

9 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Drawing on Bourdieu as a theoretical frame, this article set out to explore the role of place in defining the work experiences of male manual workers in Blackpool, UK—a seaside town that has been subject to long term decline and particular socio-economic challenges. More specifically, it has investigated how place is implicated in conditions and experiences of precarity particularly in terms of how employment circumstances and place might intersect. While a body of work has considered meanings and experiences of precarity through the labour market situation and through the contemporary employment condition (e.g., Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Rubery et al., 2018; Standing, 2009), the role of place in these dynamics has been largely overlooked. We have responded to calls for a greater attention to geographical dynamics in precarity (Banki, 2013; Waite, 2009) thereby extending understandings of how it is encountered and experienced.

Here, Bourdieu alerts us to the significance of interlocking ‘field’ conditions, comprising sets of historically determined objective relations and ‘positions’ that generate particular dispositions. As a large seaside town situated in the north west of the United Kingdom, Blackpool has experienced long-term social and economic decline—its fortunes heavily influenced by local and global factors including the rise of cheap package holidays and budget air travel that drew tourists from its traditional heartland in the industrial North. While there has been heavy investment in an improved transportation system and in a modernised seafront, creating jobs in construction and the tourist trade, work open to manual workers is largely seasonal, insecure and low paid. Poor transport connectivity that largely precludes work outside the area contributes further to a place dependence in terms of a reliance on local work. This, together with a lack of a higher education establishment (unlike Preston, Liverpool and Manchester nearby) adds potentially to a culture where formal qualifications are given less value and where progression in terms of vocational education is beset with material difficulty. As we suggest, these and other geographically rooted ‘field’ conditions have a profound influence on dispositions and how precarity is encountered within these domains. Although some of these dispositions may be shared by manual workers in other deprived areas, they also draw on the unique socio-economic geography of Blackpool, with its specific location, cultural history, opportunities and employment relationship characteristic of manual work in the area.

Against this background, and as an empirical contribution, results from our study highlight the importance of localised *employment prospects*, characterised in this geographical context by a high level of competition over a limited pool of seasonal and insecure work, by inaccessibility and by a heavy dependence on local employment. These combine with low levels of qualifications, a culture of geographical immobility linked to family ties and practical difficulties of accessing wider employment routes to generate a ‘geographical

constriction’ that has its roots in the particular socio-economic and cultural conditions of Blackpool as a ‘struggling’ seaside town. While current research has focussed on the vulnerabilities of mobility through the migrant experience (e.g., Banki, 2013; Waite, 2009), our data highlight how precarity is associated with an often unsolicited and detrimental ‘rootedness’ in one area. Furthermore, while family ties and enjoyment from living by the sea are sources of positive meaning, an emotional geography and dispositions of ‘provisionality’ underscore feelings of anxiety, insecurity and lack of faith in the future in a context where, as Standing (2009) found of precarious workers more generally, participants lack voice and are largely outside localised and wider systems of power.

On a theoretical level, we extend understandings of how precarity is encountered and experienced by combining place, precarity and Bourdieu’s relationality to develop the notion of ‘place precarity.’ As we argue, drawing on our data, place precarity can be understood as the complex interplay between place (with its particular geography and ‘constellation’ of social relations), work prospects, (im)mobilities and dispositions, which, together, both generate and reflect vulnerabilities inside and outside of work. We capture this interrelationship in Figure 4 below:

As we argue, these factors in focussing on the intersection of place and employment conditions and in highlighting the interplay between subjective and objective dimensions explain the nature and experience of precarity in this context. Informed by Bourdieu, this is to recognise that bodies are situated in a site or location as part of lived, concrete experience (Massey, 1984, 2005). Place from this

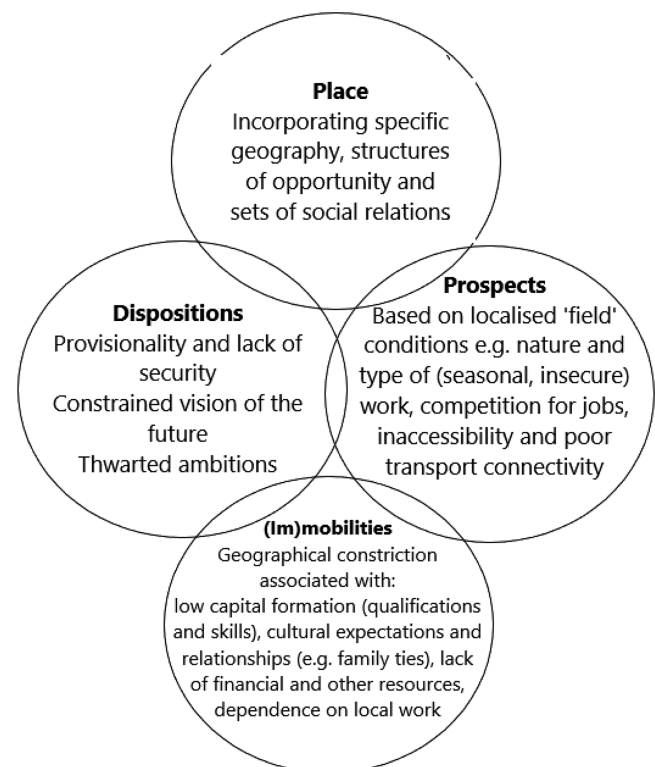


FIGURE 4 Place precarity

perspective is not simply a passive dimension in which events might be played out (Findlay, 2005) but produces particular vulnerabilities and uneven experiences of work. In other words, place plays an active role in the structuring experience of precarity where the nature of place with its specific objective structures, social relations and cultural constraints can influence feelings and experiences of security, insecurity and threat. We can see through Bourdieu's relational approach how the specific social, economic and cultural conditions of a geographical region (e.g., location, prospects, traditions and institutions) combine with limited capital formation to generate a place dependence and 'rootedness,' signifying a power dynamic that constrains individuals in terms of mobility and spatial choice. This in turn is productive of particular dispositions (in relation, for example, to attitudes towards present circumstances and faith in the future) whereby localised and wider systems of advantage and disadvantage become internalised in terms of what is seen as possible—a form of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990) that helps to legitimise current relations of power.

In developing a geographically 'grounded' understanding of precarity, we propose a more nuanced comprehension of its conditions and experiences that goes beyond a singular focus on employment circumstances. Informed by our findings, highlighting the significance of the interplay between place, prospects, (im)mobilities and dispositions, this can potentially capture geographical difference in that unique characteristics of place can be positioned, in future work, at the centre of inquiry—offering potential to explore how place is implicated in precarity in different locations. Our research forms a starting point in this respect. We have accordingly, through our understanding of place precarity, extended the literature on work-based vulnerability, forming a foundation for research in other geographical and employment contexts.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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