

“Labour Migration, Precarious Work and Liminality”

ABSTRACT

Liminality, as originally conceived by anthropologists, is a temporary ‘in-between’ state that acts as a bridge, connecting old roles to new roles, and resulting in a desired new state. The article applies this concept to precarious migrant work. We argue, specifically, that migrants in low-wage and insecure work occupy four main liminal realms following their cross-border mobility: the temporal, the financial, the social and the legal. We explore these four realms using qualitative interview evidence (36 interviews) from comparative research with migrant workers, migrant employers and community stakeholders in Norway and the UK. The paper then reflects on the balance between liminality (as a positive, temporary and in-between state) and limbo (as a negative, long-term state). We argue that migrants doing precarious work avoid limbo, but at the same time do not experience liminality as originally conceived. Instead, they experience what we term ‘ambiguous liminality’: where precarious work is encountered as liminal, but where the exact mechanisms and pathways leading to a desired new state are multiple, uncertain and incremental. Liminality, however ambiguous, is a vital expression of migrant agency; but it also serves the interests of capital too: masking the negatives associated with precarious work and helping to underpin precarious migrants’ work ethic.

KEY WORDS: Labour, Liminal, Migration, Precarious, Work.

Introduction

Precarious employment, and the resultant insecurity around income and the realization of career and family goals, now appears commonplace for an increasing segment of the workforce in core higher-income economies (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011; Strauss, 2018). Social researchers have for some time also identified the bifurcated structure of labour markets, where a set of workers in 'primary' labour markets are offered high salaries, stable employment contracts and possibilities for upward mobility, while the 'secondary' segment of the labour force endure short-term contracts, low or unstable wages, and often face a ceiling in terms of upward social mobility (Doeringer and Piore, 1971; Harvey, 1989; Peck, 1989, 1996; Piore, 1979). To fill secondary labour market vacancies in higher-income core economies, employers across a wide range of sectors have looked to low-wage labour migrants from more peripheral lower-income countries (Bauder, 2006; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003).

There is a tendency in some of the literature on precarious work to assume that long-term insecurity is a defining characteristic and that there is essentially a firewall between primary and secondary employment. However, while insecurity is certainly a key facet of precarious work, such work can offer those at the lower echelons of the labour market an opportunity to get much-needed foothold and possibly also progress (Newlands, 2022). Precarious work can be envisaged by precarious workers as a stepping-stone towards more secure livelihoods, and in some cases can actually function as such. Thus, and as Strauss (2018) cautions, one should not neglect agency even in highly precarious labour markets.

The spectre of precarious work offering the potential to progress is important to labour as a 'resilience' and 'reworking' strategy (Katz, 2004; Hauge and Fold, 2016). Workers are able to better cope with the insecurity of their working lives through the prospect of advancement (resilience) and in some cases are able to actually use precarious work to improve material circumstances (reworking). In addition, capital tends to emphasise the value of

precarious work both to mask the realities of this devalued form of employment, and to underpin work ethic by stressing how short-term ‘pain’ will lead to longer term ‘gain’.

Debates around the role and value of precarious work are commonplace and it is important to stress that what might be seen as dead-end work for some might be perceived as a stepping-stone by others (Lam and Triandafyllidou, 2021; Muñoz-Comet and Steinmetz, 2020; Van Doorn, 2020). There is the distinction here between intentions and outcomes (Hauge and Fold, 2016), with some viewing precarious work as an opportunity to progress, but fewer individuals actually progressing on from this work. Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 983-993) talk very usefully, in this respect, about ‘projective agency’ and the role that potential future possibilities play in shaping experiences and attitudes irrespective of actual outcomes.

The question of whether precarious work functions as a stepping-stone or dead-end is clearly dependent upon context and does not have a simple answer. This is precisely what Johnson-Hanks (2002) refers to as the “vital conjuncture”, that is: “a socially structured zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives” (Johnson-Hanks, 2002: 871). The idea, taken from that of Bourdieu and Sewell, expresses that social life and life passages can only be understood with reference to how structure contingently combines to shape action (Sewell, 2005).

Aware of this complexity, we draw upon research focused on low-wage migrant workers (temporarily and seasonally employed in Norwegian and UK horticulture) to explore precarious work through the lens of ‘liminality’. Liminality, following Van Gennep (1909/1960), is traditionally understood as the marginal space that individuals temporarily inhabit after their separation from their old role and before they assume an expected new role.¹ Essentially, it is a temporary in-between state leading on to a desired end state. It involves a combination of a psychological/ subjective and material/ objective journey resulting in

eventual positive progress. Limbo, in contrast to liminality, occurs when positive progress does not ultimately materialise and the liminal in-between state becomes a long-term one.²

In this paper we draw on the concept of liminality to underline the fact that there is often not an impermeable firewall between secondary and primary labour markets and that, especially for migrants, precarious work does not inevitably constitute a long-term state of limbo. However, unlike the original anthropological conceptualisation of liminality, we suggest that the desired end state and expected new role is far from being clear or assured. Instead, there are multiple, uncertain and incremental journeys on from precarious work. This is why we advance the concept of ‘ambiguous liminality’. It underlines the fact that migrants in entering in-between, liminal realms on moving to a host country and taking up precarious work hope and anticipate an improvement in livelihood circumstance, but that journeys towards this improvement are often rather ambiguous.

The two key questions for this paper are: 1) what does liminality look like for precarious migrant workers after their move from lower- to higher income economies (RQ1); and 2) to what extent is the precarity that migrants enter into associated with positive livelihood transformation (RQ2)? The former question is important in order to get a handle on the morphology of liminality with respect to precarious migrant work. The latter question is key to distinguishing between liminality (a temporary and positive in-between state) and limbo (a long-term and negative state).

In the section that now follows we review the growing literature on liminality. We first examine its emergence as an anthropological concept associated with ritual passage. We then reflect upon the application of liminality to work and employment, before considering the use of the concept by migration scholars. Following this literature review, the qualitative interview methodology that informs our article is outlined. Data is drawn from two case studies of low-wage labour migration to horticulture regions in Norway and the UK amounting to 36 in-depth

interviews with migrant farmworkers, migrant employers (farmers), and community stakeholders. We then identify and discuss four liminal realms – the temporal (employment), the financial (income), the social (family and community) and the legal (citizenship) – that low-wage migrant workers enter following their move abroad. Before concluding the article, we consider whether these liminal realms are transitional and transformative – part of a (transnational) livelihood strategy for migrants and their families – or whether they might be more accurately associated with a state of limbo. Our argument is essentially that precarious work is liminal but in more ambiguous ways than the original anthropological concept of liminality allows for.

Liminality

Liminality literally means on the threshold, and stems from the anthropological work of Van Gennep (1909) and Turner (1969). First advanced by Arnold Van Gennep in the 1909 classic *Rites de Passage* (Van Gennep, 1960), liminality relates to the middle “betwixt and between” stage in the passage of rituals (Turner, 1967, 1969).

The three stages in the ‘rites of passage’ are: separation (from the before), transition/liminality (the between), and incorporation (into the after). According to Van Gennep (1960) rites of passage accompany a change in place, state, social position and age and, of relevance to this migrant-focused article: “the passage from one social position to another is identified with a territorial passage...In short, a change of social categories involves a change of residence” (1960: 192). Traditionally, specialists were on hand in tribal societies to help relatively inexperienced individuals move through the ritual process (Van Gennep, 1960).

According to Van Gennep (1960) liminality is often emplaced in specific ways, occurring at particular sites; sites that are often physically hidden from view, with those associated with them also invisible and/ or ambiguous in a social sense (see also Turner, 1967).

The *marge* (in-between space) is also entered into via some kind of detachment from, and/ or rejection of, a past state and usually transitioned out of (into incorporation) by the adoption of an elevated social position. Individuals enter the liminal phase through both compulsion and through choice, often at junctures in their life, as they transition from one state to another in their life course.

The different everyday realms of migrant liminality, which we will outline below, are often positively embraced initially by low-wage migrants because they are expected to ultimately be transitional and transformative. Crucially, Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1967, 1969) see the three-stage rites of passage as a relatively assured linear journey. Indeed, “many of the positive aspects of liminality stem from its being transitional, spatio-temporally limited, and transformatory” (Bamber et al., 2017: 1519).

There is, however, the increasingly observed phenomenon of long-term liminality i.e. limbo (Bamber et al., 2017; Johnsen and Sørensen, 2015), in which scholars have observed that the idea of linear progression of moving from point A to point B is not often achieved. Garsten (1999), for example, argues that there is a pervasiveness and enduring nature of liminality for low-wage workers under late capitalism, whilst Menjívar (2006) talks about migrant liminality extending indefinitely.

Aware of these arguments we suggest that there is in fact a middle-ground between the anthropological conceptualisation of liminality (resting on an assured linear journey to a desired end state) and limbo (where liminality becomes a long-term state). We call this middle-ground ‘ambiguous liminality’ to emphasise the fact that precarious migrant workers are embarked on multiple, uncertain and incremental journeys out of the various liminal realms they encounter after moving abroad. Migrants often do not appear completely trapped in secondary labour markets, nor though are they certain about the career and livelihood journeys they are on (see Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 Here]

Liminality at Work

It is in work and employment studies where the concept of liminality has developed the most over recent decades (Bamber et al., 2017; Söderlund and Borg, 2018; Tagliaventi, 2020). One of the classic early studies on liminality of relevance to this article was that of Garsten (1999). Developing the concept of core (primary) and peripheral (secondary) labour (Harvey, 1989), Garsten looked at the changing nature of work and employment in Sweden and the US (and the developed world more generally). She argued that organisations have changed to become more flexible, so we now have greater number of temporary employees ‘betwixt and between’ that are a permanent feature of the labour market (Tagliaventi, 2020: 35-42). The rising liminality at work is, according to Garsten (1999: 615), associated with “experiential ambiguity” in the sense that it can be positive and voluntary for some but negative and involuntary for others. We develop this idea of ambiguity throughout the paper, essentially taking forward but modifying the original anthropological concept of liminality.

The negative implications of liminality within precarious work are often more evident, overall, than the positive implications. Chun (2009) highlights “legal liminality” as being a key outcome here; whereby workers may well act as employees but actually fall into legal “cracks” and “fissures” and thus do not enjoy the protections of a full employer-employee relationship. We have had debates, for example, over recent years in relation to platform/ gig economy workers, many of whom are migrants, and the way in which gaps in employment law are exploited by business to reduce the rights, entitlements and pay of those in precarious work. In such situations, risk is being increasingly transferred onto labour and away from capital, with workers positioned (as a cost and liability measure) outside of the traditional rights and

protections afforded to (a shrinking number of) core workers. Liminal legal status for workers is thus associated with the deregulation of labour markets and intensification of workplace regimes.

Alongside the legal ambiguity associated with precarious work, there is also temporal uncertainty. Purser (2012: 11) notes, for instance, that for day labourers there is: “routinized experience of chronic and obligatory waiting...A liminal period (that) serves as an instrument of inspection, as an instrument of immobilization and as an instrument to intensify labourer’s investment in the uncertain pursuit of work”. Thus, it is through insecurity in work and an unstable income – temporal and financial liminality – that labour is rendered deferent and dependency cultivated. The numerous negative dimensions of liminality within precarious work (only some are discussed above) help to explain why many hope for eventual advancement (Garsten, 1999; Winkler and Mahmood, 2015). However, and as Bamber et al.’s (2017) study makes clear, the targets required to achieve stable and permanent employment are often dynamic: moving further and growing higher as one approaches.

Liminality has also commonly been discussed in relation to the boundaries between work and private life (Baines, 2006; Daly and Armstrong, 2016; Johnsen and Sørensen, 2015; Sturdy et al., 2006). As part of this, we see workers trying to carve out space(s) for themselves and their colleagues against the backdrop of the need to perform (emotionally and productively) at work, and in the context of growing workplace surveillance (e.g. Shortt, 2015). Allied to this, we also see the productive and reproductive sphere become increasingly divided for migrants in particular, whereby work is performed in one country and social reproduction in another (Author F). The research informing this study draws on workers who often live onsite (at work) and have left family and friends back in the home country. Thus, at the same time as there is a divide between work (host country) and social life (home country) there is also the blurring between work and leisure.

Liminality and International Migration

The main tendency, in linking liminality and migration, has been to focus on the legal realm (Abrego and Lakhani, 2015; Fudge, 2018; Menjívar, 2006; Torres and Wicks-Asbun, 2014; Tsoni, 2016). Liminal legality as a concept was first advanced by Menjívar (2006) in her study of Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigrants in the US. Through this research, Menjívar (2006) identified migrants who occupied a grey-area in-between documented and undocumented status. Such ambiguity demonstrates that a binary between legality and illegality is simplistic (Kubal, 2013; Ruhs and Anderson, 2010). Liminal legality is something encountered in particular by asylum seekers (Tsoni, 2016; Tunaboğlu and van Liempt, 2020).

As far as low-wage labour migration has been concerned, an understanding of legal liminality is important if we are to appreciate the active role of the state in fashioning precarity by creating tiers or hierarchies of rights and entitlements (Anderson, 2010; Feldman, 2020; Könönen, 2019). Guestworker migration schemes, for instance, do just this. They create liminal legal space between full citizen and illegal migrant, providing workers with only limited citizenship and usually a temporary stay-horizon tied to employment and even a single employer (Hennebry, 2014). Due to the laws in place governing access to citizenship, low-wage migrant workers are often liminal by virtue of being ‘permanently temporary’ (Hennebry, 2012) and thus not full citizens.

Importantly, the liminality literature has rarely connected with low-wage labour migration. Underthun’s and Jordhus-Lier’s study into the hospitality sector in Norway is a notable exception (Underthun, 2015; Underthun and Jordhus-Lier, 2018). The authors note how hotels function as archetypal liminal spaces: providing temporary accommodation; for diverse consumers; involving work that is precarious; performed by transient individuals; originating from numerous countries. They observe two different types of liminal labour

migrant: the ‘expatriate worker’ and the ‘working tourist’. The expatriate worker is often prepared to accept liminality at work, and even embrace it, because of the value of this work when compared with opportunities back home and/ or because of the view that this work will eventually lead to socio-economic advancement (Author D; Author B; Author G; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). For working tourists, liminality is accepted because of the particular phase of life that the individuals are going through and the lifestyle considerations that accompany this life stage. In these situations, the migrant worker is a tourist as much as a worker (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009) and the temporary outlook and lifestyle considerations make liminality at work palatable.

Drawing these literatures together, the paper argues that the concept of liminality can help one to better understand why migrants engage in, and sometimes embrace, precarious work. Put simply, insecure (temporary and seasonal) and low-wage employment may appeal because of the way it is seen to function as an ‘in-between’ life-stage. This in-between state is expected to be temporary, but the exact journeys away from it are often multiple, uncertain and incremental: hence our emphasis throughout on ambiguous liminality. In the paper that follows we chart the morphology of liminality with respect to precarious migrant workers. We then explore migrants’ actual abilities (rather than just intentions) to move through the liminal and experience longer-term improvements in livelihood circumstance.

Methods

The qualitative material informing this paper comes from two rural horticulture regions in Norway and the UK. The two regions – South-Eastern Norway and Western England – share a strong historical reliance on horticulture and, while the relative share of horticulture in the regions’ economies has declined over recent decades, the horticulture industries are still

considered economically, culturally and socially important. Moreover, the regions' horticultural firms share a strong reliance on temporary and seasonal migrant farm workers.

A total of 36 people associated with the horticulture industries in Norway and the UK were interviewed in 2018-19 for our research encompassing: 14 migrant workers; 10 migrant employers; and 12 community stakeholders. The migrants interviewed were all from central and eastern Europe with 4 seasonal and 10 permanent (but formerly seasonal) workers sampled. All 4 of the seasonal workers lived on-site, with 4 of the 10 permanent workers living on-site as well. The 6 permanent migrant interviewees who lived within the wider rural community had all previously lived on-site. For the seasonal workers the off-season was spent back in the home country and many of the permanent workers would also spend their holidays (during the off-season) back in the home country.

The 12 community interviewees were selected as key stakeholders representing, *inter alia*: local government, labour regulators, the police, health bodies, and the local voluntary sector. Most interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All were analysed manually using thematic analysis, which in the case of this article meant reading all 36 interviews and selecting quotes illustrating the nature of liminality (RQ1) and the degree to which this liminality was associated with a positive livelihood strategy, rather than limbo (RQ2).

The research involved multiple day trips to each study location where we carried out face-to-face in-depth interviews generally lasting around 45 to 90 minutes. We targeted fruit and vegetable growers, a sector characterized by vertical integration along the value chain and labour-intensive production, as well as seasonal crop cycles and the predominance of migrant labour. Due to the A8 (2004) and A2 (2007) EU enlargement phases, in both Norway (mainly Polish) and the UK (mainly Romanian and Bulgarian), central and eastern European workers were most evident in the fields working entirely legally. In addition, due to the recruitment strategy adopted, most of the migrant interviewees had long histories in the locality, either as

returning seasonal circulators (4) or as more permanent residents (10). They were thus able to provide knowledge about the migrant population beyond their own personal perspectives.

One limitation in our study was the fact we sampled migrants with a history of long-term engagement in horticultural work within the host country, often for the same company. Migrants with limited harvest experience were not sampled. In addition, those who had gone back home, or moved to another country, and/ or changed sector were not included in our sector case-study. As it stands, and with the sample we have, we certainly can chart the liminal nature of precarious horticultural work (RQ1) and can illustrate some of the ways in which this work is associated with positive livelihood transition and transformation (RQ2). However, had we had the opportunity to sample more widely we would have been able to make broader claims around the general function of precarious work as a stepping-stone or a trap for migrants.

Findings

It has been argued that: “the understanding of what it means to be liminal could benefit from investigating the liminal experience along various analytical dimensions” (Winkler and Mahmood, 2015: 56). Using guidance from the established literature, as outlined above, the article will now do this by identifying and examining four everyday realms of liminality: the temporal (employment); the financial (income); the social (family and community); and the legal (citizenship). These four everyday realms are summarised in Table 2 and will now be illustrated, drawing on evidence from employers, stakeholders and migrant workers.

Our first aim in the paper (RQ1) is to develop and advance the concept of liminality as it applies to precarious work and low-wage labour migration. It is also important one reflects on the outcomes of migrants engaged in precarious work and assesses the degree to which improved livelihoods are ultimately evident (RQ2). Evidence of such improvement is key, we argue, in distinguishing between precarious migrant work as a liminal (a temporary and in-

between state) rather than limbo (a long-term state). Our findings in this respect are nuanced: the four liminal realms identified are generally viewed as a temporary, in-between state and there is also some evidence of livelihood advancement. However, movement to a desired end state appears complex, uncertain and incremental: hence our emphasis on ambiguous liminality.

[Table 2 Here]

Temporal Liminality (Employment)

The first liminal realm we identify for low-wage migrants is a temporal one, focusing on the precarious nature of employment on a daily and seasonal basis. Much of the work in horticulture is temporary, with hours determined on a daily or weekly basis, and overall employment rarely lasting the entire year. The peak season is shortest in Norway (June to September) and longest in the UK (April to October). In both study locations (as well as being seasonal) work availability varied on a daily/ weekly basis depending on the weather, crop cycles, and consumer demand.

This hard-wired flexibility shapes workers' lives and underpins a temporal liminality. For example, Gabriel (a Lithuanian migrant farmworker in Norway) reflected that:

‘When you are working in farm...you cannot be...make any plan, you cannot make any plans for few days forward, because you never know...all depends on weather.’

Alongside the daily/ weekly uncertainty, seasonality also characterises and shapes migrants' lives. This is similar in many ways to Purser's (2012: 11) observations around day labourers and their “chronic and obligatory waiting...A liminal period (that) serves as an instrument of inspection, as an instrument of immobilization and as an instrument to intensify labourer's investment in the uncertain pursuit of work”.

Nevertheless, within the overall context of temporal liminality it does seem possible to establish stable employment rhythms and routines and to carve out some security and familiarity, which is deemed good for both employees and employers. For instance, it was common to invite the more productive seasonal workers back year-on-year, with many eventually progressing into more permanent positions and moving on from their initial temporal liminality:

‘Experience tells us that experience helps. The longer you've picked, the more seasons you've picked, the better you are at it generally...So an average person who has never worked here before will pick 10 kilos per hour. Someone who returns will pick 14. Someone who's three seasons plus will pick 18, as an average...So if you're picking on the field, a supervisor can give you a what we call a warning. And then at the end of the season, when we're looking to invite people back, we look at the number of warnings that people have received... We're at 52% this year with returnees.’ (Bernard, Employer, UK)

Binford (2009) notes that “interior conditioning” arises from farmers requesting specific workers season after season in the sense that migrants only want to get noticed for their hard work and deference.

Given employers’ desire to recruit and reward returnees, it should come as no surprise that the migrants we interviewed had worked through their initial liminality to gain more stable employment either returning season after season or moving from seasonal to permanent work. The four seasonal circulators (all in Norway) had been returning year on year (for between 5 and 17 years) whilst there were also a significant number of permanently employed workers in our sample (2 of 6 in Norway and 8 of 8 in the UK) all of whom had started off life as temporary seasonal workers but had then experienced upward career mobility. We will reflect more on this in the penultimate section of the paper.

Financial Liminality (Income)

The second main sphere of migrants' liminality, intimately connected to the temporal liminality highlighted above, concerned their perilous financial position. Horticultural workers in rural areas in Norway and the UK had all moved from relatively peripheral economies and were initially exchanging low incomes back home with precarious incomes in the host country. Alongside this, migration costs money and so workers can initially get into debt on moving abroad.

The financial liminality of migrants was noted by community informant Inge:

'Those that are working out in the fields today are earning such a low salary, and the farmer takes all the profit, then we could have gone to the farmers and told them that "enough is enough, this must end. Now something needs to change". But the thing here is that we [the consumers] are pressuring the price on food when we buy it...And then the result is that the farmers keeps less and the guy working in the fields he gets...gets...it is already at a minimum...there is much sin going around. In the pursuit for profits. That is how it is.' (Inge, Community Informant, Trade Union, Norway)

Not only is the horticultural sector being squeezed due to structural pressures, with migrant workers the most exposed to these, but an individual's pay within the sector varies on a daily, weekly and monthly basis (due to the availability of work) and varies according to performance (due to the prevalence of 'piece-rates' used to top up basic wages).

Nevertheless, temporary/ seasonal horticultural work can be financially rewarding in the long-run, and therefore income can become more secure over time. This was true for the permanently employed workers in our sample (2 of 6 in Norway and 8 of 8 in the UK) who had been able to move on from seasonal work. Alongside this upward mobility, precarious migrant workers use a "dual frame of reference" (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, 1995;

Waldinger and Lichter, 2003) whereby they assess the host country job relative to the home country and/ or invest wages from the host country back home. This means that financial liminality in the host country can be worked through by a transnational orientation and associated 'arbitrage' (Author F) across a core-periphery divide.

Gaspar, for example, talked about the value of work in Poland versus Norway:

'17 years ago I start studying, my brother was working on the farm [in Norway]...So we tried on the farm. So he just bring me also. He quit because he found another job in Poland and I stayed. I tried to work in bank also in Poland, but I got an offer in Norway and I just, yeah, chose the better value salary...So I worked, so I start working in Norway.' (Gaspar, Polish Migrant Worker, Norway)

Similarly, Gabriel observed that: "my salary here (Norway) is two three times bigger than in our country (Lithuania). For just, just for this...for workers, not for managers or something higher. But for workers it is!". The value of migrating from more peripheral economies to work towards the bottom of the labour market in core economies was clear in the UK too:

'The minimum salary in Bulgaria is 200 Euro monthly. So actually, people earning the same money weekly here in the UK. So this helping them to stay six months relaxing in Bulgaria...Yeah, yeah. They invest, because if you have the salary in Bulgaria, you can't buy house or car. But when they work in the UK then can buy everything!' (August, Bulgarian Migrant Worker, UK).

Nonetheless, Gorski (a Polish migrant working in Norway) acknowledged that despite wages being higher in Norway: "If I want to live here (permanently) I have to change the job". Adam (a Romanian migrant working in the UK) similarly underlined the value of moving past the financial liminality associated with temporary/ seasonal work:

‘Well, it's about stability first of all. You know that you have like certain incomes, your life is secure so you are not worry about how many hours you are going to work next week.’

Low-wage labour migration, in this sense, is about the medium and long-term augmentation of income. It is about the move from low wages at home, to precarious employment (temporal liminality) and income (financial liminality) abroad, but using this to eventually improve livelihood circumstances.

Social Liminality (Family and Community)

The third main sphere of migrants' liminality related to a lack of social life outside of the workplace (Author F, Author I). Strauss (2018: 625), in a review of precarity, notes the importance of focusing on both 'life' and 'labour' drawing together the productive and reproductive spheres. This section underlines the importance of this: moving from a consideration of migrants' insecure employment (temporal liminality) and their associated unstable wages (financial liminality) to looking at a social level.

Social liminality was evident in both the UK and Norway where most workers lived in tied, on-site, and often temporary forms of accommodation (e.g. caravans). The value of this type of accommodation was that it was cheap relative to other forms of rural accommodation – “living outside is way, way more expensive” (Alistair, Polish Migrant, UK) – and that workers were close to the fields and pack houses and could thus be called upon to provide their labour at relatively short notice.

Workers were allowed to live with other adult family members/ workers on-site, but children were generally not allowed. Indeed, it was argued by some that workers without family ties were more productive, as Beth (a UK employer) explained:

‘It's not a nine to five job. So it's very difficult to work around families... This is growing. It hasn't got time for somebody to, pick the children up from school. The focus needs [to be on] picking there and then, and it's so time precious. We don't know from one day to the next what days the shifts are going to be. So with the guys working here, living here, they are a lot more flexible. They kind of give the hundred percent of their time and their life to the farm once they're here... Cause they haven't got their children... [But] you know, they haven't got that all “I've got to go tomorrow to go watch my daughter's play or whatever”. So they are a hundred percent committed to the job.’

Recalling Van Gennep's assertion that living on the *marge* involves being hidden from view, it seemed that one of the few times harvest workers came into contact with local people was during their periodic (usually weekly) trips to the supermarket or grocery store:

‘You see them very often at the grocery store. They are there buying food, during the evening, and... So it can often be many... many out walking. Yes. Apart from that... they live on the farm, you know, and they work a lot, and...ehm.’ (Ida, Community Informant, Local Council, Norway)

‘They don't cause any trouble. I very, very rarely have any trouble with them in the local town. Like we, we ship them in, bus them in to town to the supermarkets. So we put on free transport for them. They go pretty much, they leave the farm, they go to Morrisons or they go to Aldi [two prominent UK supermarkets], they do their shopping, they get back on the bus and then they come back to the campsite.’ (Beth, Employer, UK)

In this sense migrants working on farms in rural areas tend to live in self-contained “bubbles” (Beth, Employer, UK) and constitute “a village amongst themselves” (Bernard, Employer, UK).

Overall, it was clear that, whilst migrants were key to the success of food production they were largely veiled and hidden from view (see also Lever and Milbourne, 2017). This

“bubble-like” existence was especially the case for circulatory migrants, and can make financial and practical sense for workers (on-site accommodation is relatively cheap and accessible), and certainly can help employers (when workers are close to the fields and are not faced with competing proprieties of work and family life). However, social liminality is not a state that many workers desire over the medium to long-term (Horgan and Liinamaa, 2017; Perry, 2018; Author I).

Legal Liminality (Citizenship)

The fourth sphere of migrants’ liminality related to their legal status (the right to reside, equal treatment and equal rights at work, the right to welfare, access to health care, etc.). Given the context of European freedom of movement at the time of the study (2018-19), the legal status of migrant workers in both Norway and the UK was assured and there was little evidence of irregular migrant workers being present and the associated impacts of legal liminality. It is worth noting, however, that with Brexit the UK has gone from the free movement of EU citizens to a more restrictive visa regime granting low-wage agricultural workers only limited citizenship status (from January 2021). Thus, legal liminality may well become more of an issue in UK horticulture. In addition, there are now signs of Norwegian farmers recruiting migrant workers beyond the EU (from Asia) that suggest issues around visas and legal liminality are becoming more salient.

Moving on from the Liminal

The above has charted the morphology of liminality – essentially defining it – with respect to precarious migrant workers (RQ1). The task now is to reflect on these four constituent liminal realms and whether they are associated with improved livelihood circumstances (RQ2).

Precarious work may function as a trap for some migrants and as a stepping-stone for others (Lam and Triandafyllidou, 2021; Muñoz-Comet and Steinmetz, 2020; Van Doorn, 2020). It would be foolish to make generalisations here: there is simply a great deal of diversity with respect to whether the liminal realms initially encountered by migrants when working in the host country become associated with liminality or limbo over the long-run. Given this, we want to end by illustrating the different ways in which low-wage migrants can use precarious work as a stepping-stone towards a more favourable life (either in the host country or back home) and thus move on from the liminal realms identified above.

There were two key strategies here. First, and taking into account the different standards of living and exchange rates between home and host countries, migrants talked of their temporary harvest work actually providing them with “good money” relative to the employment available back home. As Arthur (Romanian migrant, UK) explained:

‘Because in different country, like Bulgaria and Romania, the money's not so good. So, on a salary, it's not good. So, the people, if they need money, if they have family, they will come...They want to come...I don't know how much is the minimum, but I think if they are good workers, they making money. How fast you picking, you make good money.’

A number of migrant worker interviewees went on to explain how the “good money” they earned in Norway and the UK allowed them to send remittances to family and invest in property back home (Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). Andy (Bulgarian migrant, UK) was typical of those we interviewed who were still living on the farm:

‘I'm spending money and I'm saving a bit and then when I go home I'm making some, I don't know, I have a house so I have to rebuild it a bit...To be ready for future family and stuff. Takes a lot. If I was in my country there was no way I can start to rebuilding.’

A second strategy to ensure precarious work was associated with liminality rather than limbo involved harvest workers moving onto permanent contracts (10 of our sample of 14 migrants) and moving off farm into the wider rural community (6 of the 10 migrants on permanent contracts). Grancia (Latvian migrant, Norway) talked us through his move from seasonal worker and circulatory migrant to permanent employee:

‘So I came to Norway in 2007. That was the first season, I took on a job at a factory in this municipality (study location). I worked there around four to five years. Then when a new food packaging plant was opened [where several farms source from], I was asked in September that year if I wanted to stay on in this municipality (study location) to work there, which extended my season, and then I started working also in the winter. Since then I have continued working here. At first I worked only for the season, six months, and then it was extended to nine months. This year I have got a permanent contract to work here for the whole year.’

Many on permanent contracts were then able to move away from tied on-site accommodation. As Adam (Romanian migrant, UK) explained:

‘For a better living. I mean, you need to step over, to go out from here, because it's just like it's not good for...it's good for seasonal workers, but it's not good if you start doing full years. It's not good to stay in [the caravan], especially over the winter...During the summer it's fine. There are a lot of people, you have a lot of connections. But November, December they're going. So it's like, like a couple of people remaining. It is cold and it's not exactly the life we chose to live. So I said like I decide together with my partner just to go from here...We rent a house and it's a bit more expensive. Because it involves different stuff like car insurance, petrol, and the small things which, at the end of the month, matter. I mean, are outgoing from your pocket. So yeah, it wasn't

easy, but it's good that we decided to go to because you have more opportunities than staying here....It's not a big advantage, but I think that it's a normal life.'

This transition from temporary to permanent employment and the possibilities opened up by this in terms of living independently off-site show that harvest work can be liminal and to paraphrase Adam a "normal life" can eventually be achieved.

Precarious work may be tolerated, even embraced, over the short to medium term because of the fact that migrants see it as, hopefully, transitional and transformative: an in-between and temporary state leading to advancement either in the host country or through a return back home. The way in which low-wage migrants link precarious work to liminality reflects the importance of agency. To elucidate, Katz (2004) talks of a 'resilience-reworking-resistance' three-pronged typology in understanding agency and migrants' *resilience* comes through from the way in which precarious work is survived and weathered by migrants viewing it as liminal (as a projective form of agency); migrants then also sometimes *rework* their precarious labour market position and improve their material circumstances either in the home or host country.

Liminality, though, not only underlines migrants' agency in the face of precarious work it is also a double-edged sword in the sense that it may be used by capital to persuade workers of the value of short-term 'pain' for long-term 'gain'. Put simply, migrants' aspirations towards advancement through a temporary phase of precarious work may actually allow capital to extract greater value from labour. Newlands (2022) notes, for example, the near universal expectation among gig economy workers that their work will be short-term and argues this short-term orientation helps workers to cope with the physical, emotional and identity demands of gig work (see also Myhill et al, 2021). Migrants work hard at the bottom of the labour market partly out of necessity but also partly out of a belief that their circumstances are temporary and that they can work their way out of a liminal state. Capital not only benefits from this desire

amongst some workers to move on from precarious work, but employers are also much more likely to stress this ‘stepping-stone’, rather than the ‘dead-end’, potential of precarious work.

Conclusions

The paper has defined liminality for migrant workers via four constituent realms (Table 2): the temporal, the financial, the social, and the legal. Low-wage migrants encounter these realms when moving across a periphery-to-core (lower-income to higher-income) economic gradient to work in precarious jobs. In particular, we showed how the liminal state entered into through migration can involve: time-limited insecure employment; a higher yet unstable income; family detachment and community invisibility; and a potential reduction of rights.

The question of whether these constituent realms of liminality are ultimately transitional and transformative and associated with improved livelihood outcomes was then explored. We argued that precarious migrant workers are often not completely trapped within secondary employment and exhibit a form of ‘projective agency’ (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) that provides them with resilience in the face of a harsh labour market: they expect precarious work to be liminal. Moreover, two actual reworking strategies were evidenced. These, we suggest, are part of multiple, uncertain and incremental journeys and reflective of ambiguous liminality rather than of a neat and assured linear path to a desired end state (see Table 1). Crucially, the association between precarious work and liminality, however ambiguous, serves the interests of capital as well as workers, and helps to explain the work ethic of migrants at the lower echelons of the labour market.

A task now is to broaden research to explore whether the ambiguous liminality and its four constituent realms applies to other sectors of the economy which are home to precarious work. It would also be interesting to explore the journeys of many more migrants through precarious work in a longitudinal sense and to look for evidence of inter-sectoral, intra-sectoral,

transnational and inter-generational advancement. Moreover, to what extent is worker resilience (and an associated work ethic) contingent upon ambiguous liminality, and, what are the range of reworking strategies precarious migrants use on their multiple, uncertain and incremental journeys towards a desired end state? Finally, discussion with employers would also help flesh out the notion of ambiguous liminality and its role in accounting for why precarious migrants work as hard as they do.

Endnotes

- ¹ Van Gennep's original text was published in French in 1909 and not translated into English until 1960. In the article we draw on the 1960 translation.
- ² Note that liminality and limbo are often conflated, yet they are not synonymous (see Bamber et al., 2017 for a discussion).

Acknowledgements

To be added.

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