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Critically evaluating the ‘precariat’: a case study
of poverty and precarity

By

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Abstract

This thesis evaluates the theory that a *new* social class exists in Britain – the precariat.

The literature review provides context for the theory and an overview of the theory. Therefore, one major contribution of this thesis is its usefulness as a tool for scholars when discussing the precariat. This thesis' overview of literature regarding the precariat is the most extensive compilation of literature on the theory in existence.

Ultimately, I argue – and the literature review displays – that there is no academic consensus as to *who* belongs in the precariat and *what* the precariat is. Moreover, empirical research on the precariat is limited, and, also, does not aid in the debate.

I have developed a case study, within my methodology, of the precariat in the adjacent coastal towns of Bournemouth and Poole. Utilising an extended case method, the lived experiences of the participants exposed many issues, particularly related to the welfare state. This builds into a major focus on mental health, where I argue that the participants' mental health needs are not being met.

One major point of debate within literature on the precariat relates to the politics of the so-called class. Therefore, this thesis focuses on the political views and understandings of the participants and extends the discussion by focusing on how they understand themselves in terms of class – with one question ending all semi-structured interviews: “what class are you?”

To conclude, this qualitative research challenges the notion of the precariat as a class, while recognising it as a relevant sociological grouping.

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First and foremost, I want to thank my supervisors – Dr Jonathan Wistow, Dr Jonathan Warren, and Dr Kimberly Jamie. This PhD has been a rollercoaster and without the three of you supporting, encouraging, and guiding me, I am certain I would not have managed to complete this thesis. I could not have asked for a better team of supervisors, and it is hard to find the words to express my level of gratitude. Thank you for everything, it's been an incredible journey.

As I'm writing these acknowledgements it feels surreal. When I left school, very few people would have had any hope that I would be able to take my education very far at all. So, as I reach this milestone, I'd like to thank my four sixth form teachers. Without the four of you, I would have never started university in the first place, let alone be submitting this thesis. So, thank you – Mr Baldrey, Mrs McArdle, Miss Power, and Mr Streeton.

Finally, I would like to thank all the people who participated in this research. You all trusted me with intimate details about your lives, and I have worked my hardest to make sure this thesis does you justice. Thank you.

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1. Introduction

One in five of all people in the UK are living in poverty. 8.1 million of those are working-age adults (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2025). Nine children in an average classroom (30 pupils) are living in poverty (Children Poverty Action Group 2025). Disabled people are 50% more likely to be in poverty than non-disabled people (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2025).

This thesis starts from the point of view that the above stats are proof of a failing society much in need of change. At the time of writing this introduction; the Labour Party have been in power for around 10 months, with a large majority providing them with a strong mandate. However, rather than enforce policies that create real structural change, the depths of poverty and inequality are worsening. Starmer's government is continuing with welfare cuts that characterised the 14 previous years of Conservative governments, offering neither change nor hope.

Sociological attempts to understand the lived realities of people in poverty, and that create increased discourse on inequality, are more needed than ever. The language of 'class' allows sociologists a field within which to understand inequalities deeper.

Theories and ideas of the existence of a 'precariat' class coming into existence, amid the context of deindustrialisation and globalisation, have become popular over the past 15 years (*see, most notably*, Standing 2011; Savage 2015) – as sociologists attempt to understanding the impacts of neoliberalism on class structures. This provided the starting point for this thesis. In this thesis, I provide an extensive overview of the precariat, utilise the literature to define a sample population and case study to research, develop a methodology for performing the research, and critically explore the findings. Ultimately, this thesis explores the lived realities of people in positions of poverty and precarity, with a specific focus on the mental health issues faced by people in such predicaments. It also focuses on the political disillusionment of the participants, who are feeling hopeless and without any faith or feeling of representation from politicians and political figures. Within a discussion of feelings about politics, a further

discussion about class follows, in relation to a final question asked of the participants at the end of their semi-structured interviews: ‘what class are you?’

Research questions

1. What is the precariat, and who belongs in it?
2. Given the emphasis placed on the ‘danger’ of the precariat, what are the politics of the precariat?
3. What can be learned from the lived experience of the precariat?

These three overarching research questions are developed and discussed further in the methodology chapter (Chapter 3).

The relevance of class

In this context of prevalent and increasing poverty and inequality, class remains prominent in political and public discourse. On 18th September 2024, Kemi Badenoch appeared on ‘Chopper’s Political Podcast’, as part of her bid to become the new leader of the Conservative Party. On the podcast, hosted by GBNews (Ridler 2024), Badenoch stated: ‘I grew up in a middle class family, but I became working class when I was 16 working at McDonald's.’



Figure 1: One of many viral tweets, reacting to Badenoch's statement.

The quote went viral, and the following are just two examples of countless social media posts that mocked Badenoch's statement:

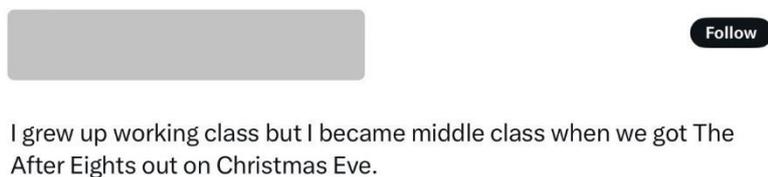


Figure 2: A humorous tweet, parodying Badenoch's statement.

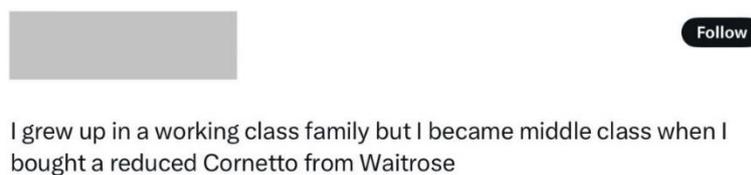


Figure 3: Another humorous tweet, parodying Badenoch's statement.

The original quote and the resulting mockery exemplify, very well, what the thesis is about - firstly the fact that class *matters* in political and general discourse/life, and, secondly, that class is understood to be fluid. While Badenoch's assessment of her own class credentials did not

chime with the British public, her understandings of class as being fluid hold similarities with proponents of the theory of the precariat, which forms the basis for the research in this thesis.

The present political era, in this late stage of capitalism, is one that is often defined as being based-around identity politics and the divisions emerging around these (*see* Winlow & Hall 2023). Prominent social movements and organisations are powerfully promoting the voices of the marginalised minorities. For example, the #MeToo Movement displays the prominence of feminism, empowering women to stand up to sexual assault and harassment; and, the Black Lives Matter movement has become a household name in its efforts to illuminate the racism still ongoing in the West. At the same time, large parts of the sociological field embrace intersectionality, giving recognition to how all sorts of identities intersect, to better understand oppression and social injustice. However, while identities related to gender, sex, race, ethnicity, disability and age continue to find more-and-more prominence in sociological discourse, the role of social class has been marginalised. Class, once central to the discipline, has been on the decline for decades. This phenomenon was summarised by bell hooks (2000: vii), at the turn of the century:

“Nowadays it is fashionable to talk about race or gender; the uncool subject is class. It’s the subject that makes us all tense, nervous, uncertain about where we stand.”

However, Kemi Badenoch’s appeal to be, or *have been*, working class, displays that class is *still* an important part of identity in Britain. It is still a characteristic that politicians seek to use as a way of making themselves more relatable and, therefore, electable (e.g., “my father was a toolmaker” became a tagline in Keir Starmer’s pursuit of seeming relatable and, ironically, has now become a slogan used to mock his attempts to do so). The backlash Badenoch faced in response to her quote displays a deep sense of class remains embedded in the British public – it provides evidence that British people have a ‘class-sense’, as argued by Atkinson (2015: 68), where, “[...] we still categorise people without even thinking about it on the basis of what we see or hear.” So, class still matters to the British public. British people still have an inherent understanding of class and distinctions between them. However, while this may have seemed

obvious to many of the British public, Badenoch's idea of *becoming* and *un-becoming* a class is a view also held by some sociologists of class.

A brief introduction to class and the precariat

Definitions of class, in sociology, traditionally leaned on the works of Karl Marx or the works of Max Weber.

Marxist definitions are based solely on an individual's economic relationship to the means of production (i.e., owning capital; selling labour) (Scase 1992; Atkinson 2015; Roberts, Cook, Clark and Semeonoff 1977; Cannadine 1998). The complexities of Marxism will be touched upon further in chapter 2, when discussing criticisms of Standing's (2011) 'precariat' but, broadly speaking, Marxists can split the global population into two broad categories: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

Weber's understanding of class adds some complexity. While Weber recognised, like Marx, that ownership of property plays a major role in the formation of classes, he also recognised the market position of an individual and their life chances (taking into account their skills, credentials and opportunities) (Weber 1944). Moreover, he separates class (economic situation) from status (honour/prestige) and party (political power) (Ritzer 2003; Scaff 1998; Collins 1975).

While Marx and Weber dominated 20th century understandings of class, and still certainly hold much-credence and respect in the field today, contemporary sociology has seen a Bourdieuan understanding of class become increasingly popular. To put it in basic terms, Pierre Bourdieu thought about class in terms of economic capital (money/assets), cultural capital (knowledge skills), and social capital (networks/connections) (Bourdieu 1984). Therefore, he differed from Marx and Weber by placing emphasis on cultural tastes, education, and everyday dispositions. A more-in depth overview of Bourdieu will be provided in chapter 2 of this thesis when discussing Savage's (2015) adapted use of the 'precariat', as it was Bourdieu who inspired Savage's methods and I argue that Savage's work lacked a full appreciation of a Bourdieuan theoretical framework.

Guy Standing's *The Precariat* (2011) took inspiration from Marx and maintains a focus on economic relationships. He describes a class schema where the precariat exists as the third-lowest class. Before Standing, the 'precariat' had been used by some activists, most notably during the early 2000s. So, it was not his original conception, but it was Standing who gave the term popularity – with the term entering the Macmillan dictionary shortly after the publication of his work (*cited in* Sherman 2016). For Standing, the precariat is *above* the 'unemployed' class and the 'underclass', but *below* the 'old working-class' (or, 'proletariat'). One thing that is problematic is that, as like Badenoch's understanding of class, Standing's classes are fluid and often linked to age. This means that the children of people from wealthy backgrounds can spend periods *in* the precariat, and then float out of it again. For example, the privately educated son of a doctor and a lawyer might struggle to find employment after university, and work part-time as a barman for six months, without regular employment, and, therefore, according to Standing's (2011) loose definition, form part of the precariat. But then, after six months, he might join his parent's law firm and enter the salariat (a very financially secure segment of Standing's schema). This hypothetical example is not too dissimilar to Badenoch's experiences. She has an interesting life story, not without its difficulties as her parents struggled to gain British citizenship. However, her father was a GP and her mother was a professor. Did that stint working in McDonalds make her, for a short while, working-class? 'No' seemed to be the overwhelming opinion of the British public.

So, unsurprisingly, on reading Standing's (2011) work a disparity is clear between academic understandings of class and general conceptions of class. However, it is not only the fluidity of Standing's schema that is problematic. There is an issue with the wording too. How can a precariat class exist if so few of the people who are apparently *in it* have most-likely never even heard of the word? Can a class exist if it is only prevalent in the imaginations and writings of a fraction of social sciences academia, and the memories of a relatively small group of activists? Despite its increasing use in academia, and despite finding itself in the dictionary, the 'precariat', has not become a part of everyday and colloquial language popularity (the findings in this thesis support this claim).

One of the most problematic aspects about the use of the term 'precariat' is that there is no consensus on what the 'precariat' even *is*, which needs to be overcome for it to have wider use and applicability. The literature review chapter of this thesis outlines and describes this

issue further. However, while the precariat is the focus of this thesis, it must be noted that this thesis maintains an overarching argument that the term is problematic, when used to describe a social class. This thesis, therefore, is not an attempt to legitimise or argue-in-favour of the term's acceptance and usage in sociological/political discourse. The term merely presented a starting point for critical research into the lived experiences of people in positions of poverty and precarity in Britain. Furthermore, this thesis does the opposite of supporting the usage of the term, and actively challenges the notion of the precariat as a class-in-itself.

1.1 Justification and rationale

This thesis was born out of a personal frustration with academic understandings of class. While I am able to point to some great examples, such as *Getting By* (McKenzie 2015), *Industrial Teesside, Lives and Legacies* (Warren 2018) and *Hunger Pains* (Garthwaite 2016), these are now few-and-far-between in academic sociology. I wanted to add to these works and, in doing so, challenge the idea that the precariat exists as class-in-itself. I accept the precariat as a useful sociological grouping but using the term 'class' to describe it is problematic.

Savage's (2015) *Social Class in the 21st Century* utilised the term 'precariat' in his class schema – one of the largest ever sociological attempts to map class in Britain. Moreover, it was a national talking point which displayed the relevance of class, at a time when, both in politics and academic sociology, it was lacking representation. However, I take issue with Savage calling the precariat a 'class'. I fundamentally believe that the precariat, as described by Savage, is a fraction of the working-class – and, would have respected his work far more if he had framed it in such a way. By breaking his schema into seven different 'classes', I fear that it only serves to divide an already fractured working-class, rather than to empower and elevate a 'new' precariat class. I also take issue with Savage, like Standing, describing this group of people as 'dangerous'. Such language, no matter how well-intentioned the theorists were/are, is divisive and demonising.

That is why I was inspired to start this research. I wanted to display, through a literature review, how the theory lacks consensus and, through my research, that the term does not

resonate with the people it is meant to describe. Moreover, while wanting to add to the theoretical discussion, I also wanted to find out about how people in positions of poverty and precarity are experiencing life and how their lives could be improved. I wanted my work to give some voice to a population who are under-heard, under-researched, while being over-theorised and stigmatised. Like McKenzie (2015: 197), who states that the working-class in the 21st century: “[...] are known and named as feral, underclass, scum, and living on ‘Benefits Street’” I wanted my thesis to challenge harsh and unfair narratives that are played out in the media and to provide an accurate representation.

1.2 Overview of chapters

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of this thesis is long and expansive, giving a full and necessary overview of the ‘precariat’. This is important because, to this author’s knowledge, an extensive overview of the varying theorists, theories, and definitions has not been undertaken across the wide range of books and peer-reviewed articles *about* the precariat. This is problematic when some academics now use the term ‘precariat’ without any scrutiny of the term itself (*see, for example*, Rys and François 2024).

The literature review begins with a history of the term *before* Standing’s popularisation of the term, in 2011. The term first emerged across Europe in the 1980s (the exact roots are debated) but then became more popular during the EuroMayDay protests of the mid-00s. This leads into a contextual history, focusing on neoliberalism in the UK. The history describes how Thatcher’s governments, and Blair’s acceptance of neoliberalism, provide the basis for Standing, and others, to disregard more traditional class schemas and to establish new ideas of class.

Following an overview and critique of Standing’s often confused and confusing theory, this thesis provides an overview the various adaptations and critiques of Standing’s work. This

includes a typology (Figure 5), which usefully displays the disparities in how different theorists have utilised the term.

The adaptation of Standing's theory that is given most room for discussion, in the literature review, is Savage's (2015) *Social Class in the 21st Century*, which is used as the basis for defining a sample population of participants for this research. This thesis argues that Savage's definition of the precariat is the most apt, while still not accepting that the precariat should be described as a 'class'. Moreover, a discussion of Savage's usage of the term necessitates a brief overview of Bourdieu's concept of capitals, which helped to guide Savage's research.

Next the literature review looks at the recent empirical research literature on the precariat (i.e., research that has specifically used the term 'precariat'). This brief section is important for the rationale of this project. As the literature review will display, there is an abundance of theoretical literature regarding the precariat but there is an extremely limited amount of empirical research literature where the term 'precariat' is used to describe the participants.

Finally, the literature review highlights some prominent alternative theories, such as the 'multitude', the 'underclass', and the '*lumpenproletariat*'. This displays that the precariat, as a theory, does not exist in isolation, and that there have been many other unhelpful attempts to re-term, re-name and/or re-classify the working-class.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 is the methodology chapter, providing an overview of the research problem and research questions. The chapter provides an overview of how the terms 'case', 'space' and 'place' have been utilised and understood.

This case study is situated in the adjacent towns of Bournemouth and Poole, located along the south coast of Britain. These towns, while often seen as prosperous and attractive to tourists, have long histories of economic and social marginalisation. The working-class

population in this area has faced significant challenges, which are compounded by a historical lack of representation and a geographical marginalisation from traditional working-class politics/debates. Over time, this has led to a situation where the working-class have often been overlooked in terms of policy attention and social support, perpetuating cycles of deprivation and disenfranchisement common in coastal towns (Beatty and Fothergill 2004).

The sampling process for this case study involved employing Savage's (2015) loose definition of the precariat. The decision to choose Savage's definition instead of Standing's (2011) definition will be discussed in the literature review. Savage's definition allowed for a flexible and contextually specific approach to identifying participants. In total, 40 individuals participated in semi-structured interviews, providing a wealth of qualitative data about their experiences. An additional five participants took part in walking interviews, a method that allowed for more informal, reflective conversations as they navigated the spaces that were significant to them in the towns. Two focus groups were also held, encouraging group discussion about the interview findings.

The research took elements from an extended case method approach (*see* Burawoy 1998), which suggests that the process of data collection and analysis should be ongoing and iterative. This approach allowed the case study to evolve gradually, with key research themes emerging over time as data was gathered, interpreted, and reinterpreted.

Chapter 4

The first chapter of the findings is titled 'lived experience'. This begins with a biography of place, providing some history and understanding of the case study location(s). This practice was informed by Warren & Garthwaite's (2014) framework of 'biography of place'. It also utilises the theory of 'nested deprivation' (Boswell et al. 2022). The biography of place uses data about the local area and is then expanded using data from this research. This chapter is, then, broken into four intersecting sub-sections: austerity, universal credit, food poverty, and homelessness.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 discusses mental health, which emerged as an overwhelmingly prominent topic throughout the semi-structured interviews. This chapter details the abuse, issues of addiction, the impact of growing up in care, and suffering from bereavement, that were shared by participants. It contributes to critical understandings of how individualism permeates discussions of mental health, rather than structural causes of deprivation. This chapter, importantly, is critical of both the access that the participants have to treatments and the effectiveness of the treatments provided. This leads to a conclusion, that community-based approaches to mental health deserve more support from local and national government, rather than a medical model of support which is lacking in efficiency and efficacy.

Chapter 6

Chapter Six focuses on politics, which is a major concern in literature on the precariat (*Most notably* Standing 2011; Savage 2015; Foti 2017). While participants expressed apprehension about the topic of politics, their everyday experiences were inherently shaped by political forces, in particular their feeling of isolation from the wider political landscape. The chapter displays that, in an era of post-democracy, the participants feel completely isolated from politics and do not have any faith in the good-will of politicians. This chapter forms an argument that in order for this issue of political disillusionment to be overcome, there needs to be more efforts to get real *authentic representation* in politics. The participants are desperate for politicians who look, sound, act and *feel* like them. Also, all participants were asked, at the end of their interviews, “what class are you?” For many, it was difficult to answer, displaying a disparity between the sociological accounts of the precariat and the reality of the participants own identities. It offers a fundamental rethinking of the way sociologists have classified people by, crucially, centring voices of the most marginalised.

Chapters 7

Finally, a discussion and conclusion chapter will summarise the findings in relation to the research questions. Moreover, this chapter discusses the findings in a critical way. It also considers future research and ends with a personal reflection.

2. The Precariat

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the idea of the precariat, and how it has been theorised by sociologists. The ‘precariat’ is often used as a term to describe a global class but, for the sake of this literature review, Britain will be the primary focus. The reason for this is that the primary research is based in Britain and Savage’s (2015) *Social Class in the 21st Century*, which is utilised for the sampling criteria for identifying participants for this thesis, was also focused on Britain.

This chapter begins by looking at the history of the term and its usage before Standing’s research popularised it. Next, this chapter explores the historical context of neoliberalism, under-which the precariat, as a theorised class, developed. This is followed by an in-depth overview of Standing’s theory and the subsequent adaptations and criticisms of his work – most notably, Savage’s (2013; 2015) adaptation. This is followed by a review of the existing research-literature on the precariat. Finally, a brief overview of some alternative theories provides a useful contrast that aids understanding of the notion of a precariat class.

2.1 The development of ‘the precariat’

Guy Standing is undoubtedly the most prominent figure within academic discussions of the precariat. Since 2011, with the publication of his book *The Precariat*, this theorised-class has become one of the most contentiously debated topics within the field of social class in sociology. However, a fully informed understanding of ‘the precariat’ requires an overview of three different, but intertwined, areas of sociological inquiry: precarity, precariousness, and precarization.

Precarity

The study of precarity as a condition, in sociology, can be traced back to the 1960s, when Pierre Bourdieu first discussed how capitalism was reshaping the workforce, with precarity becoming a key-feature of working life, for many (*cited in Jørgensen 2016*). Bourdieu's focus on precarity, as a condition of the working-class under capitalism, intensified towards the end of his life, as he declared 'Job Insecurity is Everywhere Now', in his *Acts of Resistance* (1998), this is a consequence of neoliberalism as the hegemonic mode of global capitalism, at the end of the 20th century. 'Prècarité', to Bourdieu, was, "[...] viewed as an inherently and overwhelmingly negative subject experience of future loss and confusion produced directly by changing patterns of employment." (Hogg: 2021: 3). Moreover, Bourdieu (1997: 82) provides implicit insights for the effect of precarity on mental health and politics:

“Casualization profoundly affects the person who suffers it: by making the whole future uncertain, it prevents all rational anticipation and, in particular, the basic belief and hope in the future that one needs in order to rebel, especially collectively, against present conditions, even the most intolerable.”

Mental health and political disillusionment emerged as core themes in the research process of this thesis, so will be returned to later in this chapter and then, again, in the findings chapters. This thesis presents a clear argument that uncertainty of employment has a negative impact on mental health. Moreover, the empirical data from this thesis will display how experiences of precarity have led many of the participants to lose all political hope.

Another influential scholar of 'precarity' is Maribel Casas-Cortés (2014), who refers to precarity as a 'toolbox concept'. Casas-Cortés argues that the term is a very precise and useful descriptive term for understanding social reality which has great potential when being utilised politically. However, she argues that, while the term could and should be utilised politically, it should not be seen as a 'final solution', in the way that it has been utilised by proponents of the

existence of a precariat class. Instead, she argues that precarity should be used to ‘test political hypotheses’ and ‘act as a point of departure’ (*see also* Hogg 2021).

Casas-Cortés (2014) defines four conditions contributing the emergence of precarity:

- The removal/rollback of the welfare state: “In the context of social welfare states, the initial sense of precarity referred to an increasing loss of labor rights, to missing those provisions that had been achieved, historically, by the actions of numerous workers’ movements and that had been institutionalized at the national level.” (ibid.: 209)
- The normalisation of intermittent and immaterial labour: “Working by temporal phases was no longer an exception proper to sectors such as the spectacle industry or seasonal agriculture work but rather was becoming a moral generalized condition” (ibid.: 211); “[...] contemporary capitalist accumulation is founded not only on labor exploitation but also on the exploitation of knowledge, culture, free time, the relational resources of individuals (such as communication, sex, socialization), living material, imaginaries, and so on.” (ibid.: 214)
- The normalisation of the mobility of labour: “A significant portion of struggles have started to link the issues of migration and precarity, pointing to workers who are increasingly expected to be mobile and to labor under less-formal contract arrangements.” (ibid.: 215)
- The feminisation of labour and life: “[...] the feminization of labor implies that the affective-relational component of those historically women’s tasks is becoming a general tendency of labor in general.” (ibid.: 220)

Casas-Cortés’ four points provide a comprehensive overview of the conditions in which precarity has emerged in this developed stage of neoliberal capitalism and globalisation. While inspired by, and giving recognition to Pierre Bourdieu, hers is an attempt to redefine precarity. She, like Bourdieu, does not go as far as to propose that precarity has created a distinctive

precariat class, but her development of precarity in relation to political action is certainly more in line with Standing's (2011) theory.

Another influential author on precarity is Judith Butler, who agrees with the other theorists discussed in this section that neoliberalism has greatly intensified precarity. Butler (2009: 25) writes that precarity is, "[...] a politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death." – In other words, precarity is the intensification of vulnerability, based on political contexts. What's more, it is an 'inescapable vulnerability': "[...] distributed and hierarchized by contemporary neoliberal capitalism." (Hogg 2021: 1). Butler is arguing that precarity disproportionately affects marginalised groups and that systems of power and inequality need to be challenged, in order to help those vulnerable individuals, and to create a more just and equitable society (*see also* Springveld 2017; Lawn 2017; Berwald 2024).

Precariousness

Butler (2009) also contributes to the discussion by making a crucial distinction between 'precarity' and 'precariousness,' which serves to deepen our understanding of vulnerability and its social implications. Precariousness, according to Butler, should be defined in opposition to the 'fantasy' of the 'masculine, autonomous, and free subject' – an idealised notion of an individual who exists independently and is not dependent on others for survival or well-being. Claesson (2024: 61) summarises this as: "Precariousness is the inevitable vulnerability of social existence, the fact that our lives are, in a sense, always dependent on others." Butler's analysis was informed by the socio-political climate of the post-9/11 world, where the global sense of insecurity and interdependence became starkly apparent. She recognises the 'precariousness' of all individuals, acknowledging that we are all vulnerable, as we exist in complex, interwoven social networks – where our fates are intertwined with the well-being of others. This vulnerability is not limited by borders or individual status; rather, it reflects the fundamental reality of being human in an interconnected world.

This concept of precariousness differs from ‘precarity,’ which Butler argues is the way in which this inherent vulnerability is managed and distributed within society. Claesson (2024: 61) asserts that: “[...] organised in social situations, intensified for some subjects and minimised for others, according to the corresponding political structures.” In other words, while precariousness is a universal feature of human existence, precarity refers to how social, political, and economic systems exacerbate or alleviate this vulnerability based on one's position within the social hierarchy. This distinction is crucial for understanding how vulnerability is not simply an abstract or theoretical concept, but one that is shaped by concrete political and social conditions.

According to Butler (2009: 25), precarity exists within a hierarchical structure, where some groups – typically those who are marginalized, oppressed, or impoverished – are disproportionately, “[...] exposed to injury, violence, and death.” The vulnerable positions of these groups are not just the result of individual misfortune or natural causes but are the product of broader societal inequalities that make certain lives more precarious than others. Butler cautions against conflating the general idea of precariousness, which speaks to our shared vulnerability as human beings, with the more specific, structured vulnerability of precarity, which varies significantly depending on one's social and political standing. This warning is critical for understanding how the vulnerability of some can be exacerbated by systemic forces, leading to disproportionate suffering and a deeper sense of insecurity. By making this distinction, Butler highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of how power and inequality shape the experiences of vulnerability in contemporary society.

Precarization

Inspired by Butler's definition of precarity, Isabel Lorey's (2015) *The Government of the Precarious* (which includes a forward written by Judith Butler) offers a significant development of the concept, presenting it as a process of government 'precarization.' This precarization is described as a dynamic whereby, as Butler (2015: ix) describes it: “[...] ‘precarity’ consolidates power among those who wield power to alternately promise its alleviation and threaten its continuation.” Lorey's analysis expands on the idea that precarity

is not simply a passive state of vulnerability but rather a tool wielded by those in power to maintain control over populations and labour.

Lorey (2015) asserts that neoliberal governments strategically *use* precarity to manipulate labour forces and ensure continued social control. They (2015: 2) continue to argue that by dismantling and restructuring the welfare state, these governments not only reinforce widespread insecurity for the general population but, also, through the hegemonic forces of neoliberalism, “[...] proclaim the alleged absence of alternatives.” In this way, neoliberalism not only creates an environment where uncertainty is pervasive but also frames that uncertainty as an inevitable and inescapable condition, thereby stifling potential resistance or alternative social arrangements. This manipulation of insecurity is central to the functioning of neoliberal governments, which present precarity as something beyond individual or collective control, thus ensuring that their hold over power remains largely unchallenged.

Lorey (ibid.) further contends that precarization is not limited to the realm of work but has become an all-encompassing phenomenon, affecting nearly every aspect of life. The pervasive nature of uncertainty means that insecurity has become normalised, not just within labour markets but also in social and political domains. This widespread uncertainty, according to Lorey, is particularly troubling because it has largely gone unchallenged and is now accepted as a standard condition of modern life. People have internalised this precariousness to such an extent that it has become a largely unquestioned norm, ingrained into the social fabric of daily existence. The consequence of this normalisation is the erosion of political possibilities that might otherwise challenge or offer alternatives to the current state of precarious existence.

Despite this bleak outlook, Lorey does maintain a sense of hope. She points to the EuroMayDay protests, where precarization has served as a catalyst for political struggles. In these protests, precarity is not merely a condition to be endured but has become the starting point for organising and resisting the very systems that create it. These movements suggest that, rather than being a passive condition, precarity can be mobilised as a tool for collective action and social change. However, much like Casas-Cortés’ recognition of the potential power of precarity in political struggles, Lorey does not go as far as theorists like Guy Standing and others who have argued that precarity has led to the emergence of a new class – the precariat.

Instead, Lorey remains cautious, suggesting that while precarity can indeed serve as a rallying point for political engagement, it does not necessarily create a distinct, unified class identity.

Other theorists, such as Trott (2013: 27), have a different view, arguing that precarization is, in fact, the very process through which a precariat class is being formed. This precariat, however, is far more heterogeneous in its composition than its historical predecessor, the proletariat. Unlike the traditional working class, which was defined by more stable, industrial forms of labour, the precariat encompasses a wide range of individuals engaged in various forms of precarious employment, ranging from gig work to part-time and temporary jobs. While this new class is characterised by instability and uncertainty, its members do not share a singular identity or set of experiences, which makes the political mobilisation of the precariat a complex and challenging task.

2.2 The ‘precariat’, before Standing

The term, an amalgamation of ‘proletariat’ and ‘precarity’, has been in use across Europe since the 1980s – decades before Standing popularised it. The etymology of the word can be traced to the Latin *precari* – meaning: to beg and pray, which means that one must be reliant on the favours of others, and, therefore, live an unstable and uncertain life (*see* Bremen 2013; Ross 2016). These themes are very-much still relevant in discussions of the precariat. Moreover, Standing (2011: 15) references the *banausoi* of ancient Greece as the ‘antecedents’ of the precariat. These were people who were required to do productive labour in society and were, “[...] regarded by their superiors as ‘cramped in body’ and ‘vulgar in mind’ [and] had no opportunity to rise up the social scale.”

There is so much debate around the precariat – *who is in the precariat? Is it a class? Is it dangerous?* – that it is quite fitting that even the true origin of the word is debated. For example, Wacquant (2022) and Di Bernardo (2016) claim that the word was first used in Italy by trade unionists; whilst Standing (2011) and Sherman (2016) claim that it was French sociologists who first came up with it.

Loïc Wacquant (2022:162) provides a succinct historical overview of how the class-term ‘precariat’ itself developed:

“The word was coined in the 1980s by Italian trade unionists (*precariato*) influenced by the Bologna-based anarcho-communist collective *Precari nati* (“born precarious”) to designate the spread of contingent employment in the lower tiers of the job market. The theme of *precarite*, tying labour insecurity to life insecurity, was then developed in the 1990s and 2000s by French social scientists, among them Robert Castel, Serge Paugam, Evelyne Perrin, and Patrick Cingolani, to highlight the proliferation of nonstandard, short-term, part-time, benefit-reduced, and episodic work arrangements as well as enduring joblessness and their corrosive effects on the social psychology, existential possibilities, and strategies of reproduction of the postindustrial working class. From there, the word precariat diffused into the English-language debate on the neoliberal transformation of labor and politics in the early twenty-first century, animated in particular by the British economist Guy Standing.”

Wacquant’s quote shows how Eurocentric the idea of a ‘precariat’ class is (one of the criticisms of the theory that will be discussed later in this chapter) but does not give focus to the global justice movement of the early 2000s, where others argue that the class-in-itself, really came-into-being (Standing 2011; Jørgensen 2016). Notable within this movement is Alex Foti, activist, and author of *General Theory of the Precariat* (2017), who had first-hand experience of the uprisings that took place in the 2000s. Foti (2017: 15) writes that, “A decade before Guy Standing wrote *The Precariat*, the precariat had already named itself.” Foti argues that The EuroMayDay networks were the springboard for the precariat to become active in pursuit of becoming a class-in-itself. EuroMayDay was a European network of activists and organisations that aimed to raise awareness of the issues relating to precarious employment and unemployment. Its inception was the Milano MayDay parade in 2001, but by 2004 it had spread to major cities across Europe. Emily Hogg (2021: 4) writes that the EuroMayDay protests were when precarity as dynamic political concept came-to-life “[...] not as a speculation, nor as a possible opening for the future, but in dynamic, actual, grassroots politics.” Moreover, Foti

(2017: 105) argues that “[...] the precarious underclass exploded in the mega-riots that took place in Paris (2005) and London (2010).”

One of the earliest political activist groups to adopt the term ‘precariat’ were the Chainworkers of Milan, a collective of retail staff working at chain-stores (van der Linden 2014). The Chainworkers (2003) website states: “Chain and Brain Workers Unite!!! And remember; somewhere on the planet, a Wal*Mart waits to be unionized”. This creative group of mostly young people, disappointed to be the first generation less-well-off than their parents’ generation, invented ‘San Precario’, the patron saint of precarious workers. San Precario first appeared in 2004, and was depicted as a male in the uniform of a supermarket-worker. However, over the years San Precario came to represent much more and representations are very wide-ranging, symbolising any-and-all identities and any-and-all precarious professions. In 2005, the group released the San Precario Manifesto: “We are the precariat, atypical, temporary, mobile, flexible; We are the people on the high wire, in unstable equilibrium; We are the displaced and made-over people.” (*cited in* Miller 2010: 98). This short statement displays a powerful imagery of a group of people united by their common state of precarity, into the precariat – a brand new class.



Figure 4: A popular depiction of San Precario

Another one of the most-often discussed and cited sources of the precariat during global justice movement of the early 2000s is ‘The Middlesex Declaration of the European Precariat’

(Indymedia UK 2004). The 300 word ‘declaration’ from ‘networkers and flex timers of Northern and Southern Europe’ made many points, quoted and summarised below:

- “We denounce police abuse and persecution against activists in London.”
- To fight precarity all over Europe
- To assert rights for first-generation migrants and for freedom of migration into the EU
- “[...] to support strikes, pickets, stoppages, boycotts, blockades, sabotages, protests all over Europe.”
- “[...] to agitate against freemarketeers for social rights valid for all human beings living in Europe.”
- To prepare for a EuroMayDay 005 to be held in Europe’s major cities

The declaration finishes:

“We are eurogeneration insurgent: our idea of Europe is a radical, xenophiliac, libertarian, antidystopian, open democratic space able to counter Atlantacist, Hobbesian, Darwinish, warmongering, securitarian neoliberalism.

Networkers and Flex timers of Europe United: There’s a World of Real Freedom to Fight For!”

What is immediately obvious from the language in the declaration is that it is written by, and targeted at, people with a relatively high level of cultural capital of political knowledge. One of the declaration’s co-authors was Alex Foti, the aforementioned author of *General Theory of the Precariat* (2017), which will be critically discussed later in this chapter focusing on adaptations of Standing’s theory. Foti’s work will be criticised for placing such a large emphasis on individuals from a traditionally middle-class background, and with a university education, acting as a political and educational ‘vanguard’ for the precariat, or, as he describes them, the ‘cognitive precariat’. In earlier variations of the precariat and theories of precarity as a political

tool, the emphasis on the middle-class/university-educated precariat was not widely discussed. But, during the global justice movement at the beginning of this century it seems that this is how it played out – it was university students and recent graduates were the ones naming themselves ‘the precariat’. This was also recognised by Ross (2009: 35):

“[...] the vanguard of the precariat is perceived to lie with the high-wage brainworkers, whose conscientious core consists of creative workers for whom irregular employment has long been a customary way of life. The most politicized of their ranks see themselves on the front line of capitalist accumulation, whether in the copyfight over intellectual property or against the industrialization of bohemian cultural activity.”

What’s more, there is less, if any, of an emphasis by these early groups calling themselves ‘the precariat’ to describe themselves as a *class*. Instead, they were seeking cross-class solidarity, between ‘low-wage immigrant service workers and high-tech consultants alike’ (Ross 2016).

The middle-class graduate vanguard and cross-class understanding of the precariat of the early 2000s is no longer the recognised image of the precariat: “This emergent precariat has tended to be portrayed as the lowest social or economic strata of society, or as the group that is most insecure and deprived of rights.” (Trott 2013: 23). Trott’s quote is at odds with earlier portrayals of the precariat, and this is part of the issue with the theory that this chapter attempts to illustrate. The different theories of the precariat have become so disparate that the term is without value, despite some scholars utilising it, today, without consideration of the different understandings of what the precariat is or who belongs as part of it.

2.3 Neoliberalism: the precariat in context

According to Standing (2011), Foti (2017) and Johannessen (2020), the precariat must be observed and understood in the context of neoliberalism. This, in-itself, is a contentious argument that will be discussed later in this chapter when reviewing criticisms of Standing’s

work. However, this section aims to provide a brief overview of the ideology, both theoretically and in practice, which Standing attributes to the rise of this ‘class’.

The term ‘neoliberalism’ was first coined at the 1938 Colloque Walter Lippmann, a gathering of academics and economists that took place in Paris. The neoliberal project was quickly put on hold with the onset of the Second World War. Shortly after the war, Friedrich Hayek gathered 39 influential economists and businessmen to form the now-infamous Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) and the foundations of the neoliberal ideology were set (Brown 2019; Harvey 2005). Hay (2007) states that the MPS created eight ‘core tenets’ of neoliberalism, summarised below:

1. It should be the market’s role to allocate resources
2. Global free trade is desirable
3. The state should be limited and non-interventionist
4. State should facilitate the market, not substitute it
5. The defence of individual liberty
6. The removal of welfare benefits
7. Flexible labour markets
8. Private finance should be encouraged in public projects

All eight of these ‘core tenets’ have had an impact on the working class in Britain. Tenets 1, 5, 6 and 8 all point to a detachment from collectivist principles which had helped empower the working class. Tenets 2 and 7 radically transformed labour markets and contributed to the deindustrialisation of the industries that had been at the heart of Britain’s working-class culture. Tenets 3 and 4 are an attack on the Keynesian policies of democratic socialism which had created relative stability and progression in the finances of the working class. Moreover, as tenet 7 alludes to, proponents of neoliberalism embraced the terminology of ‘flexibility’, to present neoliberal labour reforms as a modernisation process. Di Bernardo (2016) argues that the propelling and embracing of the terms ‘precarity’ and the ‘precariat’ were a direct response to what he describes as a language ‘gimmick’ by the neoliberal establishment. According to early proponents of ‘the precariat’, precarious labour markets are the *same* as

flexible labour markets, but the words have very differing connotations. A flexible labour market is good for capitalists, a precarious labour market is bad for the working-class, but they are both interpretations of the same phenomena.

Within a few decades of the first meeting of MPS, two of its founding members, Hayek and Friedman, had won Nobel Prizes in Economic Sciences, and the ideology was finding great legitimacy in offering an alternative to the post-war democratic socialism. It was then, in the late 1970s, on its way to becoming a global hegemony (Srniczek & Williams 2015; Plehwe, Walpen & Neunhöffer 2006; Harvey 2005). The rest of this section of the chapter will focus on a very brief history of Great Britain's turn to neoliberalism, with some key policies as examples of the ideology in practice.

2.3.1 Thatcherism

“For her admirers, she was ‘the greatest living Englishwoman’, a new Churchill who had reversed decline, defeated socialism and restored Britain’s place in the world. For her critics, she was a small-minded bigot, who destroyed British industry, widened inequality and unleashed a new era of greed and rampant individualism.” (Jackson & Saunders 2012: 1).

It must be recognised that although the post-war years are often glorified by proponents of democratic socialism and opponents of neoliberalism, they were certainly not without their issues – otherwise, Thatcher would never have found support within working-class communities. The post-war period is referred to by Umney (2018) as a period of ‘class compromise’ – a compromise, which he argues, was inevitably intolerable for capital and labour alike, and that, without a full-shift to socialism, was doomed to fail. In other words, *something had to give*.

Crewe (1989: 28) argues that “Mrs Thatcher owed victory in 1979 to the Winter of Discontent, not to her radical manifesto.” (*see also* Jackson & Saunders 2012; Edgell & Duke

1991). Crewe goes on to argue that Thatcher appealed to the working class, as her manifesto appealed to issues in their communities that were ignored by the Labour Party: ‘work dodging, welfare cheating and crime on the streets’. Srnicek and Williams (2015: 64-5) support this point of view:

“Neoliberalism hegemony has played upon ideas, yearnings and drives already existing within society, mobilising and promising to fulfil those that could be aligned with its basic agenda. The worship of individual freedom, the value ascribed to hard work, the belief in meritocracy, the bitterness felt at corrupt politicians, unions and bureaucracies – these beliefs and desires pre-exist neoliberalism and find expression in it [...]. This is linked with the spread of middle-class identities and aspirations – desires for home ownership, self-reliance and entrepreneurial spirit were fostered and extended into formerly working-class social spaces.”

This section will not attempt to give a full history of all of the policies and actions of Thatcher’s government, which is beyond the scope of this study, instead it will provide a brief summary that gives some context for Standing’s precariat, focusing on specific policies and events.

It is important to note here that neoliberal policies were being introduced before Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979. The post-war consensus in Britain was a period of cross-party agreement from 1945 to the late 1970s, supporting a mixed economy, the welfare state, full employment, and Keynesian economic policies. However, neoliberalism had been growing support among factions within the Conservative Party, with Keith Joseph at the forefront as early as the 1960s (Sloman 2022). Most notably, the Selsdon Group, formed in 1973 but inspired by policies outlined at a 1970 Conservative conference in Selsdon Park, gave added impetus to neoliberalism, within the party, after the NUM were successful in major strikes in 1972 and again in 1974. In 1975, Thatcher was made leader of the Conservative Party.

After becoming Prime Minister in 1979, Thatcher implemented neoliberal policies quickly and ruthlessly. Writing in 1982, Stuart Hall discusses how quickly Thatcher’s transformation took place, “Three million people and more are unemployed; the whole social

infrastructure is being savaged by cuts; the economy continues to bump along the seabed. Our Hunter Killer subs seem able to surface, but the economy stubbornly refuses to do so.” (1982: 69). While Britain’s submarines can “surface” and project power abroad (as seen in the Falklands), the economy remained submerged in crisis at home, with high levels of unemployment and insecurity.

It should be noted, also, that Thatcherism does differentiate somewhat from its underlying neoliberal ideology. Hall (1979: 48) sums this up: “Thatcherite populism is a particularly rich mix. It combines the resonant themes of organic Toryism – nation, family, duty, authority, standards, traditionalism – with the aggressive themes of revived neo-liberalism – self-interest, competitive individualism, anti-statism.” Thatcher’s conservative focus on tradition mixed with the strict economic policies of neoliberalism, created what has been referred to as a ‘moral-authoritarian’ state, with the apparent immorality of the working-class collectivists as its enemy (Farrall, Hay, Jennings & Gray 2016).

Thatcher famously argued that there was no such thing as ‘society’, only ‘individuals and families’ (Halsey 1989: 197) – which Ralf Dahrendorf refers to as an ‘amoral position’: “It is the philosophy of social Darwinism, in which the struggle for survival dominates life, and the survival of the fittest is an excuse for all other consequences of that particular struggle.” This focus on individualism is a direct attack on collectivism, which is where the working class had found its power in the century before through, for example, political and labour movement mobilisation, including strike action.

The rest of this section will provide brief overviews of two major policy shifts/changes and events which display Thatcher’s neoliberal effect on the working-class. While a more in-depth overview would be useful, it is not possible within the space available in this thesis. However, these two examples have been chosen to both illustrate, and provide useful context around, changes to class politics in the UK during this period that had long lasting consequences.

Right to Buy

One of Thatcher's most prominent policies responding to and fostering individualism was the 'Right to Buy' scheme, a policy that involved the selling-off of council housing, which was not adequately replaced for future generations. Thatcher was, through this policy, seeking to create a 'property-owning democracy', taking voters away from Labour. It was also thought that workers with mortgages would be less likely to go on strike (Farrall, Hay, Jennings & Gray 2015). This led to the creation of "[...] a stark divide between those who own and those who do not." (Savage 2015: 77). In the context of the rise of a precariat class, this division is especially significant. The 'stark' divide that emerged was particularly notable within the formerly relatively homogenous working-class, where individuals who were once part of a collective, unified group found themselves increasingly separated by the ownership of property (see Hanley 2007). This shift in the structure of the working-class prompted sociologists to consider the possibility that there was a new class, or classes, emerging *beneath* the traditional working-class, which was slowly eroding as a cohesive social group. The division between property owners and renters created a new social reality, highlighting the deepening inequalities within society.

The 'Right to Buy' scheme, which was introduced in 1980, was prominently featured in the 1979 Conservative Party manifesto, where it was framed as a policy designed to 'Help the Family.' It was presented as an integral part of their broader agenda based on traditional values, most notably promoting the ideal of the 'nuclear family.' This emphasis on the nuclear family, however, was not merely a reflection of social ideals but also a form of 'moral authoritarianism.' By positioning the nuclear family as the ideal, the policy helped to demonise those who did not fit into this mould, such as single parents, the unemployed, and marginalised communities (Farrall, Hay, Jennings & Gray 2016). In this sense, the 'Right to Buy' was not just about housing but was also a strategic move that aligned with broader cultural and ideological shifts that sought to reshape the moral fabric of society.

When the 'Right to Buy' policy (under the Housing Act 1980) was enacted, it offered council tenants the opportunity to purchase their homes at significantly discounted prices, with some residents receiving up to 50% off the market value (Broughton 2019). The policy was

hugely popular among tenants, many of whom saw it as an opportunity for social mobility and a way to achieve a degree of financial security through property ownership. By 1996, a significant proportion of tenants – around 30% – had taken up the offer to buy their homes (Davies 2013). The scheme was widely celebrated at the time, being marketed as a way for working-class families to benefit from the property market, and it became a key part of Thatcher's vision for a more individualistic society.

However, the 'Right to Buy' scheme was also framed as part of a new 'common sense' that neoliberalism sought to present itself as. The policy was portrayed as a challenge to 'idleness' and an attempt to encourage responsibility, but it also contributed to the further demonisation of the poor (Cooper, Hubbard & Lees 2020). Over the following decades, this rhetoric became even more pronounced, with the poor increasingly blamed for their lack of ownership and financial stability. The policy reinforced the notion that those who struggled were responsible for their own plight, while those who could afford to buy into the system were positioned as more virtuous and 'deserving'.

Despite its popularity, Disney (2017) argues that the policy was not economically beneficial in the long term. While the 'Right to Buy' allowed individuals to achieve homeownership, local authorities were left with a shrinking stock of council housing. As the number of available properties dwindled, local authorities found themselves with fewer resources to house vulnerable populations (Byrne 2019). Homeless families, who local authorities still had a responsibility to house, were often placed in unsuitable accommodations or hotels, which ended up costing local governments more money in the long run. This created a paradox: while the policy was sold as a way to empower individuals and reduce the role of the state, it inadvertently increased the financial burden on local authorities and failed to address the long-term housing needs of many (Shankley and Finney 2020). Thus, while it appeared to be a successful policy in terms of increasing homeownership, the broader societal costs, and the creation of new forms of inequality, suggested that the benefits were more superficial than they first appeared.

Breaking the power of the trade unions

Thatcher's 1979 Conservative government marked a significant shift in the political landscape of Britain, as it became the first post-war government not to prioritise full employment as one of its key objectives. Edgell & Duke (1991: 12) explore how this policy change exacerbated inequality within the labour market, stating:

“A labour market characterised by mass unemployment inevitably favours the buyers rather than the sellers of labour power. Since 1979, the relative weakness of labour vis-à-vis capital has been exacerbated by a sustained ideological and legal attack on trade union power and on the ability of trade unions effectively to organise workers and to defend and further their interests. This has resulted in a steep decline in both trade union membership and industrial conflict.”

The decision to reject the goal of full employment was central to Thatcher's neoliberal vision. She believed that small government would not only enable individual prosperity but would also be the only way for individualism to truly flourish (Fevre 2017). As part of this philosophy, Thatcher embraced the ideology of a market-driven economy, which she argued would lead to greater efficiency and innovation. Globalisation played a significant role in this transition, with the decline of heavy industry in the UK being justified as an economic necessity. The shift to a post-industrial economy was framed as an inevitable progression, reflecting broader global trends. However, as Warren (2018: 7) notes, “Being ‘post-industrial’ is not just a matter of economic change, it is one of social and cultural transformation.” The transformation was not just economic but deeply social, reshaping communities, identities, and ways of life.

The transition to post-industrialism was not without its costs. Entire communities, particularly in areas reliant on traditional industries, were irreversibly changed. The closure of factories and mines, which had long been the economic and social lifeblood of working-class areas, left these communities in a state of upheaval. Gorz (1982), in his seminal work *Farewell to the Working Class*, famously argued that the working class had diminished to such an extent

that it had effectively ceased to exist in its traditional form. He (1982: 70) remarked that, “Work no longer signifies an activity or even a major occupation; it is merely a blank interval on the margins of life, to be endured in order to earn a little money.” This observation highlighted the hollowing-out of the meaning of work itself, as industrial jobs, which had once provided stable employment for generations, were increasingly replaced by precarious, low-wage work. Thatcher’s policies, in this context, stripped away the stability that working-class families had once relied on, replacing it with the uncertainty of a new economic order based on precariousness and vulnerability.

The Ridley Report, drawn up by Conservative MP Nicholas Ridley, drafted in 1977, “[...] which appeared to include a detailed blueprint on how to provoke and secondly win, a battle against Britain’s most powerful miners’ union.” (Rawsthorne 2018: 156), provides important context for understanding the government’s strategy. The report included a detailed plan on how to provoke and ultimately win a battle against the NUM, positioning the miners’ strike as a crucial moment in the larger struggle against collectivism in British society. The document even cautioned against attacking industries such as electricity, gas, or water, recognising that striking in these sectors could lead to widespread disruption. For the Conservatives, defeating the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was seen as the key to solidifying their control and advancing the neoliberal agenda.

One of the most significant demonstrations of this new reality was the 1984 Miners’ Strike. The strike was a response to the National Coal Board’s (NCB) plan to close unprofitable pits, which was accelerated under Thatcher’s government, and saw 200,000 miners across England, Wales, and Scotland joining picket lines (Phillips 2023). It became a clash of ideologies, between the NCB, supported by the government, and one of the most powerful organised working-class institutions in Britain. The miners, representing a core segment of the industrial working-class, were fighting not just for jobs but for the very survival of their communities and way of life.

However, the strike was not simply a manifestation of neoliberal economic principles; it was also a calculated political manoeuvre aimed at undermining the collective power of the organised working class. Phillips (2023: 367) argues that the hard-line approach Thatcher’s government took against the NUM was “[...] in fact motivated by an ambition to reorder the

political social authority.” The miners' union represented a significant obstacle to Thatcher's neoliberal agenda, and its defeat was seen as essential for dismantling the political power of the working-class movement.

The strike ended in March 1985, marking a huge turning point in British politics. The NUM's funds were depleted, and their ability to continue the strike was exhausted. The defeat of the miners signalled the decline of the once-powerful industrial working-class and the weakening of organised labour in Britain. The communities that had once been the backbone of the country's industrial economy were now seen as relics of a bygone era; their struggles framed as a symbol of resistance against the forces of economic change. Thatcher's government had succeeded in reshaping not only the economy but also the social fabric, dismantling the power of collective labour and replacing it with a more individualistic, market-driven society.

In summary, the defeat of the miners in 1985 symbolised the triumph of neoliberalism over traditional forms of working-class solidarity and security. The consequences of this were far-reaching: the political power of trade unions was dampened; deindustrialisation was accelerated; working-class job security was compromised; and, socialism, with its links to industrial labour, was marginalised.

2.3.2 New Labour's continuation of Thatcherism and neoliberalism

In the 1990s, a new debate started to emerge within sociology, questioning the 'death of class'? (*see* Savage 2003; Reay 1997).

This new debate was not surprising, as 15 years before New Labour won the General Election, Gorz (1982: 69) had said 'farewell' to the working-class: “That traditional working class in now no more than a privileged minority. The majority of the population now belong to the post-industrial neo-proletariat which, with no job security or definite class identity, fills the area of probationary, contracted, casual, temporary and part-time employment.”

Lawrence & Sutcliffe Braithwaite (2012:134) believe that 'death of class' was all part of the neoliberal plan, to undo/destroy socialism: “[...] the so-called 'death of class' was largely

a political, not a sociological phenomenon in Britain.” Whether they were right, and it was a conscious decision or if it was an unforeseen by-product of neoliberalism, class did become more-and-more removed from the political lexicon: Indeed, Jackson & Saunders (2012: 16) argue that, “By the time the Labour Party returned to office in 1997, it had accepted large parts of the Thatcher legacy. As for ‘socialism’, the word all but disappeared from British politics.”

Under Tony Blair’s leadership, New Labour’s time in power was a continuation and expansion of neoliberalism (Grover 2003). For example, in the field of education, a particularly prominent area of neoliberal expansion under Blair, Reay (2008) discusses how New Labour attempted to promote a ‘middle-class hegemony’, whereby parents were brought into a new social contract that asked for more involvement in the education process, promoting things such as supervising homework. This increased regulation meant that working-class parents were problematised. This approach also had legal ramifications: “Regulations, introduced in 2002 and strengthened in 2006, established parenting contracts and order that made parents responsible for pupil truancy and subject to prosecution leading to heavy fines or imprisonment. This is just one example of how working-class parents have been positioned under New Labour – as failing parents.” (Reay 2008: 646). Gewirtz (2001: 366) supports this argument, stating that the Labour Party, “[...] concluded that the most appropriate policy response to the available evidence [on why working-class children were not as successful in education as their middle-class counterparts] is to make all families like middle-class families [...]” (*see also* Savage 2003). In other words, the Party that was *supposed* to be the champions of/for the working-class, were now cheerleaders for the middle-class. The working-class became the ‘other’ (*see* Winlow and Hall 2023).

Grover (2003) argues that New Labour pursued a policy of ‘workfarism’, whereby the welfare state was reoriented towards encouraging welfare users to participate in the labour market through a combination of incentives and sanctions. However, Grover (*ibid.*) also recognises, from a Marxist standpoint, the existence of a ‘reserve army of labour’ was critical to making workfarism effective, as it created conditions in which a more compliant and flexible workforce could be mobilised. This may seem counterintuitive: why pursue a policy of workfarism *and* maintain an unemployed reserve army of labour? Well, Grover (*ibid.*) believes that instead of challenging the structural causes of labour market insecurity, New Labour prioritised competitiveness over the protection of universal rights. As a result, their policies of

workfarism did little to tackle in-work poverty or to provide well-paid jobs, with evidence showing that in-work poverty levels increased during their time in office (*see* Parekh, MacInnes and Kenway 2010).

If Grover (*ibid.*) is right, and New Labour did purposefully pursue a policy which maintained a reserve army of labour, trapping people in poverty, then it only adds to the shame of media depictions of poverty during the same time period. The period saw the emergence of ‘poverty porn’/‘poverty propaganda’ – media portrayals of the working-class that stigmatise disadvantaged people as being ‘deserving’ of poverty (Shildrick 2018). Cruddas (2006) and McKenzie (2017) both note while the Labour Party neglected the vocabulary of class, that the working class was ‘everywhere’ in the media, “[...] seen through caricature whilst patronised by reality TV.” (Cruddas 2006: 205), on TV shows like *Jeremy Kyle* and *Benefits Street*. The Labour Party exacerbated this problem by focusing on “hard working people”, adding to the narrative that there exists another group of people who are *not* hardworking. Allen (2014) analyses the use of ‘aspiration’ as a term used by New Labour to ensure the hegemony of neoliberalism. She argues that the middle-class were seen as something for the working-class to ‘aspire’ to become like, and that working-class culture was, in turn, ‘bad’. This, she argues, cemented neoliberal policy as the Labour Party removed the vocabulary of injustice and exploitation.

In summary, while New Labour did increase public spending by 20% to bring public services up to European standards. However, they did little to address the structural inequalities established by the previous Conservative governments of Thatcher and Major (Lupton 2013).

2.3.3 The 2008 Financial Crisis, austerity, and poverty

Political context

When Tony Blair was elected as Prime Minister in 1997, he entered office on a platform of Third Way politics (*see* Giddens 1998), marking the beginning of a new era in British politics.

According to Colin Crouch (2020), this era could be characterised as ‘post-democracy,’ a term he uses to describe a situation where democratic institutions remain in place, but they simply serve to “create the impression that all is well.” Blair’s approach to politics, reshaping the Labour Party to win elections, reflected this shift. In his 1996 conference speech, he argued that: “[...] many better off working class people voted for the Conservatives because Labour was preventing them from getting on in life” (*cited in* Wistow 2022: 38). This statement was significant because it highlighted Labour’s move towards embracing neoliberal economic policies in order to appeal to the middle-class.

By accepting neoliberalism, the Labour Party effectively aligned itself with the Conservative Party on macro-economic policies. This convergence between the two main political parties was troubling for the lower classes, as Crouch explains, because it represented a system that catered to the interests of capitalists. This ‘preferred regime’ was one in which the electorate remained passive and accepting of the status quo, no longer able to challenge the economic system that continued to benefit the wealthy while leaving the majority with little power. This created a political environment in which the key policy decisions were no longer up for real democratic debate or meaningful contestation.

The 2008 Financial Crisis and austerity

The theory of post-democracy was tested in 2008 with the financial crisis, which seemed to offer a glaring example of the failure of neoliberalism. The crisis exposed the instability and inequities of the financial system that had been central to neoliberal economic policy. However, as Crouch (2020: 57) observes, “Banks learned after 2008 just how dependent on them we have become, and how far governments are willing to go to protect them from the consequences of their misdeeds.” In the wake of the crisis, rather than being held accountable, the banking sector was bailed out by governments (Mason 2019), protecting the neoliberal system rather than dismantling it. This revealed the continued stability of neoliberal hegemony, despite its evident failure during the crisis, and highlighted the degree to which neoliberalism had become entrenched in the political landscape (Jessop 2018; Sayer 2016). According to Guy Standing

(2011), the persistence of neoliberalism in the aftermath of the financial crisis provided the conditions necessary for the emergence the precariat.

Crouch's concept of post-democracy provides a useful lens through which to understand the broader political and economic changes occurring during this period, and it will be revisited in Chapter 6 of this thesis, when exploring the politics of the precariat.

In the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis, the Labour Party had an opportunity to distance itself from neoliberalism and reconsider alternative economic policies, such as those rooted in Keynesian economic principles. However, rather than shifting away from neoliberalism, the Labour Party failed to present a clear break from its previous policies and, in the 2010 General Election, lost power to a Conservative-dominated Coalition government, supported by the Liberal Democrats. This outcome reinforced the dominance of neoliberalism in British politics, even in the wake of a global financial crisis that had laid bare its shortcomings.

Following their victory, the Conservative-led coalition government introduced a series of austerity measures that were heralded as the only viable solution to address the structural deficit left by the financial crisis (Edminston 2018). As McKenzie (2015: 10) notes, "Draconian measures have been introduced to the welfare system in all areas – Unemployment Benefit, disability benefits, Income support and Housing Benefit in particular." These austerity measures represented the largest government spending cuts since the Second World War (*cited in* Garthwaite 2016), and they were framed as necessary sacrifices to restore fiscal discipline and ensure the sustainability of public finances. However, these policies were heavily criticised for disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable in society while doing little to address the systemic issues that had led to the financial crisis in the first place.

Winlow, Hall, and Treadwell (2017) argue that the adoption of austerity policies by the Labour Party and the Conservative-led coalition signalled the complete abandonment of any substantial challenge to neoliberal economic policies. This was a decisive moment in the post-democratic era, where political and economic alternatives seemed increasingly out of reach, and the political establishment appeared unwilling or unable to address the needs of the most disadvantaged groups in society.

The alignment between the Labour Party and the Conservative Party on macro-economic policy, coupled with the persistence of neoliberalism despite the 2008 financial crisis, contributed to the rise in popularity of the precariat theory. The failure of the Labour Party to offer a substantive challenge to neoliberalism after the crisis and the subsequent implementation of austerity measures by the Conservative-led coalition government only deepened the political and social divide (Byrne 2019). The theory of post-democracy, as articulated by Crouch, provides a useful framework for understanding how democratic institutions can be maintained while political power becomes increasingly disconnected from the needs and interests of the majority.

Main and Bradshaw (2016: 38) argue that Blair and Brown's New Labour Governments were relatively successful in their attempts to eradicate child poverty, by increasing spending on in-cash benefits and heavily investing in education. Despite these successes, "The Conservative/Liberal Coalition government's policy and rhetoric favoured individual explanations for poverty, portraying poor parents as making bad spending decisions, and transmitting their attitudes and behaviours on to their children." What followed, was austerity.

Austerity is an economic idea concerned with reducing government deficits through spending cuts and tax increases. Blyth (2015) argues that austerity is more than just an economic strategy and is not necessarily pursued for economic reasons. Instead, he argues that austerity is a political ideology aimed at creating instability and profiting the more fortunate at the expense of the less fortunate.

Empirical understandings of poverty and austerity

When defining poverty, Townsend's (1983: 31) *Poverty in the United Kingdom* provides a good starting point, as it has been hugely influential on academic understandings of poverty:

"Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the diet, participate in the activities and have the living

conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities.”

This foundational work on poverty in the UK emphasised that poverty is not simply an individualised and economic issue, but a complex social phenomenon that should be recognised in the context of structural inequalities. It created a shift from simply recognising ‘absolute’ poverty, to more focus and attention on the concept of ‘relative’ poverty. Townsend’s seminal work calls for policy interventions that address the systemic roots of poverty and recognises the effects of poverty on social participation. This understanding of poverty has come to be influential on sociological discussions of poverty and is echoed in contemporary research. For example, Mood and Jonsson (2016) further investigate the social consequences of poverty, finding that economic deprivation negatively impacts social relations and civic participation. Their longitudinal study highlights that while poverty has detrimental effects, these can be reversed with improved financial stability. Sevinc (2020) complements this discussion by examining multidimensional poverty, demonstrating that socioeconomic factors such as education, gender, and household composition significantly influence poverty levels. This reinforces the necessity of a holistic approach to poverty measurement and intervention strategies that address diverse dimensions of deprivation. Ferragina, Tomlinson, and Walker (2017) examine the relationship between income and social participation, finding that participation declines with income but stabilises at certain low-income levels. Their study highlights demographic variations, noting that factors such as age, gender, and ethnicity influence participation rates (see also Stewart & Roberts 2019; Wickham et al. 2016; Stewart, Patrick & Reeves 2023).

However, despite the huge influence of Townsend’s work on academic discussions of poverty, public perceptions of poverty are still not in-line with recognising the importance of relative poverty. Dunn’s (2021) research found that only people experiencing relative poverty are likely to support relative definitions of poverty. The public, in general, are still more in favour of measures of absolute poverty. Many researchers claim that the public’s lack of

nuanced understanding of poverty comes from damaging and stereotypical narratives formed in the mass media. For example, Lepianka, van Oorschot and Gelissen's (2009) critical examination of public perceptions of poverty found that those perceptions are often based on generic categorisations of poverty, which overlook the complex nature of poverty as a social phenomenon. The researchers conclude that the media plays a pivotal role in this creation of simplistic imageries of poverty. Shildrick (2018) utilises the terms 'poverty propaganda', whereby mass-media outlets propagate the image of a 'deserving' poor, through television shows such as *Benefits Street* and *The Jeremy Kyle Show* – which make entertainment out of poverty and structural inequalities (while neglecting to discuss structural inequalities).

Understanding the extent to which poverty exists and how many people it affects is a difficult task, due to a lack of consensus on what 'poverty' means. Edmiston (2024) offers a critique of national income surveys, which obscure the realities of poverty, particularly among marginalised groups. He is critical of how useful quantitative attempts, in general, are, as they are unable to capture the experiences of people in poverty. Stewart and Roberts' (2019) analysis of responses from a government consultation reveals a strong preference for income-centric measures, with 58% of respondents advocating for income to remain central in defining poverty. This aligns with a relative poverty perspective, highlighting the importance of social norms in shaping poverty definitions. However, the authors find limited acceptance of a true multidimensional approach that incorporates non-material factors such as health and education, primarily due to concerns about potential stigmatisation of those living in poverty.

McKenzie's (2015) *Getting By* is one of the most-often-cited research outputs on the effects of austerity on a working-class community, since 2010. McKenzie utilises a Bourdieuan understanding of class, (as outlined in relation to Savage's (2015) schema later in this literature review), to explore her participants' thoughts and feelings, as well as experiences, of class. For example, McKenzie's research touches upon the stigma attached to living on a council estate, the language used by people on the estate, and feelings of distinction from 'higher'-classes. She notes that the women, in particular, felt they were 'looked down on'. These feelings manifested in an 'inward-looking' community on the estate. But, in contrast to media portrayals of 'social alienation' and 'abandonment of hope', the people spoke "[...] of adaptation, cooperation and a reflexive awareness of their lives." (ibid.: 154) – in other words, the community was struggling as a result of the structural austerity measures, but the collectivist

nature of the estate remained prominent. Moreover, McKenzie (ibid.: 6) recognises the importance of narratives and storytelling in working-class lives: “It is how we explain ourselves, how we understand the world around us, and how we situate ourselves in a wider context.”

As already-mentioned, and much-related to the once-somewhat-popular ‘underclass’ theory (discussed later in this chapter), there is a broader debate about the existence of a ‘deserving’ and an ‘undeserving’ poor. Often played out in the media, the debate has been taking place since the nucleus of the welfare state in Britain – the Elizabethan old Poor Laws. Shildrick, MacDonald, Webster and Garthwaite (2012) performed empirical research, presented in *Poverty and Insecurity*, that attempts to disprove the notion of an ‘undeserving’ poor, happy to rely on ‘benefits’ and permanently shy of work. They found no evidence that there are families who have become welfare dependent and resistant to paid labour. Instead, they found that the types of employment on offer, such as zero-hour contracts, kept people in a constant state of poverty and precarity: “Despite the clear hardships that people faced, many were resistant to claiming welfare benefits, and the welfare system was experienced as slow, inefficient and demeaning.” (ibid.: 195). This is supported by the research of McBride and Smith (2022), which focused on in-work poverty. They found that many people in poverty work multiple jobs but still cannot escape poverty and meet their basic needs. The qualitative research challenges the assumption that employment inherently alleviates poverty – poverty is not necessarily overcome by employment alone, and systemic issues of low wages and job insecurity also need to be tackled.

Hick and Lanau (2018) also focused on in-work poverty in the UK. Utilising a Markov chain, whereby researchers look at how sequences of events may lead to an outcome, the researchers attempted to better-understand what sequences of events may lead someone in-work to either exit or enter poverty. For example, they found that in households with more than one adult in-work, those in that household were less likely to enter poverty. Hick and Lanau argue that this then means that lone-parents and single people are more likely to enter poverty, and policies should be targeted to support such families and individuals. Gradín, Cantó and del Río’s (2018) similar research found several key determinants, such as educational attainment and household structure. They also introduce the concept of ‘genuine state dependence’, which is where people in poverty remain in poverty. This is because they found that the biggest

determinant of future poverty was being in poverty. Therefore, the longer someone is in poverty the harder it is for them to be out of poverty – it becomes trapping – and, also, increases the likelihood of them re-entering poverty.

Child Action Poverty Group (2023; *see also* Dorling 2024) reported that 4.2 million children in the UK were living in poverty – which is 29% of all children. The figure in 2010 was 3.6 million, so the rise has been significant during this long period of austerity. Therefore, and unsurprisingly, a lot of empirical research on poverty has been focused on childhood poverty.

Wickham et al. (2016) critique the recent policy landscape, particularly the abolition of the Child Poverty Act, arguing that current strategies conflate the causes and consequences of poverty by side-lining income-related measures. They emphasise the adverse effects of austerity on family incomes and the inadequacies of welfare reforms, which fail to provide sufficient support for vulnerable families. This highlights a broader trend within UK policy that prioritises non-income factors while neglecting the structural causes of poverty.

Dorling's (2024) study emphasises the role of housing costs in exacerbating child poverty rates, with a significant proportion of children facing severe deprivation. Dorling advocates for renewed policy efforts to combat child poverty, drawing attention to more effective measures implemented in Scotland compared to England.

The dynamics of child poverty are further examined by Stewart, Patrick and Reeves (2023), who focus on the unique challenges faced by larger families in the UK. Their findings indicate that changes in social security policies, particularly those post-2010, have disproportionately impacted larger families, reflecting a political stance that views multiple children as a lifestyle choice rather than a context needing systemic support.

There is also a stigma associated with parents in poverty and, in particular, lone mothers. Cooper (2021) assesses the differences in parenting between low-income and higher-income mothers by first defining 'ideal' behaviours, such as being actively involved with a child's education. The research found that the stereotypes of low-income mothers being less adequate as parents was ignoring the complexities of parenting in the context of poverty. The mothers in the research were not less able as parents, but structurally disadvantaged. Main and Bradshaw (2016) contribute to this discourse by exploring intra-household dynamics in child

poverty. Their study challenges the notion that poor parenting is inherent in low-income families, revealing that resource prioritization within these households often favours children's needs.

Ivinson et al. (2018) explore the intersection of education and poverty, emphasizing the need to address the complexities of lived experiences. Through community forums, they reveal significant disconnections between policy perspectives and the realities of young people living in poverty. Participants express frustrations with educational systems that fail to address their challenges, highlighting a demand for practical education which provides like skills.

Another area of research in studies of poverty is housing. As discussed in the previous chapter, Thatcher's 'Right to Buy' scheme changed societal norms of housing and has seen a decline in council housing. Many former council properties are now in the hands of private landlords. Since 2010, there has been a further increase in private rented accommodation. Bailey (2020) investigates the re-emergence of the private rented sector in the UK, particularly its implications for low-income households. Bailey emphasises that poorer households experience considerable tenancy instability. The findings indicate that the private rented sector has become the primary housing option for poorer households due to reduced welfare support, which exacerbates their housing insecurity. Moreover, the study critiques the notion of "Generation Rent," arguing it oversimplifies the diverse experiences of renters across different income classes and calls for policies aimed at enhancing tenure security and affordability.

Building on Bailey's (2020) analysis, Bailey, Livingston and Chi (2023) explore the phenomenon of suburbanisation in relation to housing and welfare reforms. Their findings indicate that low-income households are increasingly pushed to less central areas as rental prices rise in urban centres. The authors highlight a decline in affordable (the research defined 'affordable' in two ways: 1. Whether rent falls within local Housing Benefit limits and, 2. Whether they are below the 20th percentile of rents in the wider travel area) private rented sector listings, which fell from 19.7% in 2012/13 to 9.3% in 2019/20, relative to housing benefit rates. This decentralisation of low-income households suggests a growing disparity in access to resources and services.

Vera-Toscano, Shucksmith, Brown and Brown (2024) delve into the rural-urban poverty gap in the UK, particularly post-2008 financial crisis. Their analysis underscores the

exacerbating effects of budgetary cuts and welfare reforms on poverty rates in rural areas, which often face higher living costs and fewer resources compared to urban centres. The authors argue that poverty in rural settings requires distinct policy approaches that address these contextual differences and ensure equitable support across regions.

2.4 Standing's Precariat

Now that I have provided some context, I will provide an overview of Guy Standing's (2011; 2014) 'precariat'. His work on the precariat has been so substantial that it was not until 2011, after the publication of *The Precariat*, that the word first gained an entry in the Macmillan Dictionary – around 25 years after its first use (*cited in* Sherman 2016). Moreover, Standing's work has so strongly propelled the term that it is now often utilised without question by scholars, despite the disparity in understandings of *what* or *who* the precariat *is* (*see for example* Zaniello 2021; Roque 2021).

Standing (2011) places the precariat 5th in a seven-tier class structure:

- The elite – “[...] a tiny number of absurdly rich global citizens lording it over the universe, with their billions of dollars [...]” (ibid.: 8);
- The salariat – “[...] in stable full-time employment [...] enjoying the trappings of their kind, with their pensions, paid holidays and enterprise benefits, often subsidised by the state.” (ibid.: 8);
- Proficians – “This term combines the traditional ideas of ‘professional’ and ‘technician’ but covers those with bundles of skills that they can market, earning high incomes on contract, as consultants or independent own-account workers.” (ibid.: 9);
- An old ‘core’ working class (proletariat) – “[...] the battalions of industrial labourers who formed the labour movements have shrivelled and lost their sense of social solidarity.” (ibid.: 9);
- The precariat – The rest of this sub-chapter is devoted to displaying the complex and often-contradictory ways that Standing (ibid.) defines this so-called class;

- The unemployed – Standing (ibid.) does not provide a definition of this strata other than simply referring to them as ‘the unemployed’;
- The *lumpen*-precariat (underclass) – “[...] a detached group of socially ill misfits living off the dregs of society.” (ibid.: 9).

Standing’s definition of the precariat

Standing’s ‘precariat’ is not a homogenous group. In fact, Standing seems to doubt whether they are even a class at all. Despite the full title of his book being ‘*The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*’, he seems to doubt himself by describing the precariat as having ‘class characteristics’, just nine pages in. He then goes on to describe the precariat as a ‘class-in-the-making’, on its way to becoming a class-in-itself. Standing’s lack of conviction will be discussed more in the next section. However, he does later attempt to display the precariat becoming a class-for-itself, citing an example of the precariat ‘stirring’ in Spain, where Spanish locksmiths refused to take jobs for banks that would help evictions, after a spate of suicides. This strike led to barricades outside homes (*see* Standing 2014: 57).

Standing’s precariat is an overwhelmingly diverse group. The global nature of the class creates a large amount of diversity, but even if only focusing on Great Britain the differences can be remarkable. A university graduate from a middle-class family can be in the precariat, and so too can an immigrant who only just arrived in the country and has none of the advantages associated with a middle-class upbringing, such as access to better educational and job opportunities and a network of non-precariat friends and family.

Standing does not provide any clear and precise definition of the precariat, making it difficult for other sociologists to sample and test his theory. However, he does provide a lot of lists, so this section may seem list-y. Moreover, despite his lack of a clear definition, he claims the precariat make up 25% of the British population. These quotes are the closest Standing (2011) comes to defining them:

“It consists of people who have minimal trust relationships with capital or the state, making it quite unlike the salariat. And it has none of the social contract relationships of the proletariat, whereby labour securities were provided in exchange for subordination and contingent loyalty, the unwritten deal underpinning welfare states. Without a bargain of trust or security in exchange for subordination, the precariat is distinctive in class terms.” (ibid.: 9-10)

“The precariat consists of people living through insecure jobs interspersed with periods of unemployment or labour-force withdrawal (misnamed as ‘economic inactivity’) and living insecurely, with uncertain access to housing and public resources. They experience a constant sense of transiency.” (ibid.: 16)

Roque (2021: 480-1) also provides a helpful summary, when utilising Standing’s theory:

“In order to survive, the precariat is forced to accept jobs below their competence or outside their professions, doing work-for-labour, which is neither recognized nor remunerated, especially within zero-hour contracts and shift work, losing non-wage benefits, and lowering their social income and their long-term earning. In this sense, the precariat experiences not only the loss of acquired labour but also cultural, civil, social, economic, and political rights, even begging to maintain or to get a job.”

Standing (2011: 22-24) also used “the four A’s” to help define the precariat:

- Anger: Standing argues that the anger comes from a frustration at now being allowed/able to pursue a meaningful career, while being ‘bombarded’ with the material success of others and celebrity culture;
- Anomie: This stems from being condemned as ‘lazy, directionless, undeserving, socially irresponsible or worse’ by politicians and media elites;

- Anxiety: Being stuck in unsecure work and one bad stroke of luck away from losing any or all sense of dignity and identity;
- Alienation: In regard to work, the precariat feel alienated because they are not working for their own purpose but at the behest of others.

Standing (2011: 12) also defines the precariat by seven forms of labour-related security that they are lacking, which he argues make them distinct from the ‘old working class’, who enjoyed all seven:

- Labour market security;
- Employment security;
- Job security;
- Work security;
- Skill reproduction security;
- Income security;
- Representation security.

Moreover, later, in *The Precariat Charter*, Standing (2014) the following ‘10 distinctive features’ of the precariat:

- Distinctive relations of production: Unlike the proletariat, who Standing argues enjoyed the labour-related security in the list above, the precariat experience a new ‘norm’ – ‘uncertain and volatile labour’.
- Distinctive relations of distribution: The precariat does not enjoy the benefits of sources of income other than wages, such as paid vacations and company pensions
- Distinctive relations to the state: The precariat is often reliant on the state but are ‘criticised, pitied, demonised, sanctioned or penalised’. Moreover, Standing argues that right-wing political parties look after the middle-classes and the plutocracy, and social

democratic parties look after the lower rungs of the middle-class, the proletariat and liberal elites – there is no traditional political *side* that ‘looks after’ the precariat.

- Lack of occupational identity: This is mainly due to deindustrialisation, where communities and communal identities had previously been defined by one’s relationship to the dominant local industry.
- Lack of control over time: “The precariat cannot demarcate life into blocks of time. It is expected to be available for labour and work at all times of the day and night.” (ibid.: 23)
- Detachment from labour: This is often down to working multiple jobs or having only short-term employment that does not provide fulfilment.
- Low social mobility: “The longer a person is in it, the lower the probability of escape.” (ibid.: 24)
- Over-qualification: Workers are over-qualified, so entering the job market is a ‘lottery’ when opportunities arise.
- Uncertainty: “[...] not only is the precariat exposed to more spheres of uncertainty than other groups, it is also less resilient, having fewer resources to deal with them.” (ibid.: 26)
- Poverty and precarity traps: The shift to means-tested welfare has created poverty traps, as there is no incentive to take low-paying jobs.

The lists above help to summarise what Standing (2011; 2016) *means* when referring to and defining a precariat class. Taken together they amount to an extremely broad definition. As argued throughout this thesis, this is a weakness in the application of the precariat as a class because it creates an ambiguous understanding of this section of society, which undermines the validity and relatability of the concept both academically and more broadly within society.

Standing's distinctions within the precariat

Standing (2014; *also cited in* Manolchev, Lewis & Saundry 2021) also argues that there are three separate groupings within the precariat:

- Atavists: This group is made up of former working-class people who have lost their jobs due to deindustrialisation. Standing is not hopeful about the role of the atavists, arguing that they are likely to be drawn to populist views and agendas. Standing cites the Occupy Movement as an example of where the atavists were not as effective as other groups within the precariat: “[...] the drive and energy came from the educated part of the precariat, not the bewildered and atavistic parts.” (Standing 2011: 133)
- Nostalgic: These are migrants who lack a sense of belonging in their adopted homelands and miss a sense of the *present*, leading a mostly passive existence as strangers in a strange land.
- Progressives: These are educated members of the precariat, perhaps even recent graduates, who are dissatisfied with their status and their lack of a *future* on account of absent career paths. These, according to Standing (2011: 133) is the most important group in the precariat, who will define the political action of the class: “[...] it will be defined by the educated and ‘wired’ part of the precariat, exploiting the potential of electronic communications.”

This is not the only way Standing (2011: 69-70) divides the precariat. He also divides them into the following two categories:

- Grinners – Standing gives the following examples of ‘grinners’: students and backpackers willing to take on casual jobs with no long-term future; ‘old agers’ who have an adequate pension and can take on ‘odd jobs’ for pleasure and money for extra material needs; women with partners in the ‘salarariat’ and are able to treat work as a

‘sideline’, without fear of falling into poverty; men with partners who earn a ‘reasonable’ income.

- Groaners – Standing gives the following examples of ‘groaners’: young people who are unable to get into the labour market and are competing with cheaper ‘old agers’; ‘old agers’ without adequate pensions and in competition with more energetic youths; single mothers facing the triple burden of childcare, care for elderly relatives, and employment; men only able to obtain a precariat job.

Standing’s language here is, arguably, very derogatory. The term ‘groaners’ has obvious negative connotations, which does not help with understanding and recognising the outside structural factors that have impacted the position that those ‘groaners’ find themselves in. Moreover, Standing, here, makes some essentialist arguments. For example, when speaking about female ‘grinners’ he says they are women with partners in the ‘salarial’ but when he speaks of male ‘grinners’ he says they are people with partners who earn a “reasonable” income – he seems to neglect that many women now have jobs that would place them in his salariat class. Moreover, the list above illustrates a fundamental issue with Standing’s analysis – he sees class as an individual characteristic and does not discuss how one’s family impacts class. For example, a woman who works a part-time job, while her partner has a high-paying job in the salariat is deemed by Standing to be in the precariat, an oppressed group. Of course, one could argue that the woman in question lives *more* precariously than her partner, as they could end their relationship. However, to place that woman in the precariat, a completely separate class, is an over-reach and is conceptually underdeveloped. Furthermore, Standing does not consider what class their children would be in. One could, therefore, assume, based on Standing’s way of defining class, that all children are automatically members of the precariat, due to their reliance on others (parents and/or care-givers) for financial support.

Standing on the politics of the precariat

Standing believes that the people in the precariat are prone to extreme political views. He worries they may be aiming for ‘a politics of inferno’, based on ‘neo-Darwinist’ individualism, with a resentment towards collectivism. He (2011: 174) describes the possibility of precarious individuals becoming ‘loose cannons’, open to the views of populism: “Insecure people make angry people, and angry people are volatile, prone to support a politics of hatred and bitterness.” This is not a view I shared with Standing, who overstates and generalises about this population. This thesis explores this idea of the precariat, through its primary data, as the participants were asked explicitly about their political viewpoints.

Moreover, Standing alludes to racial tensions arising and is fearful that the white-British and impoverished population are most likely to be those who listen to right-wing populist political voices. “Low-income deprived communities blighted by de-industrialisation breed antisocial behaviour; their inhabitants are surrounded by squalor and suffer from relative deprivation. As such areas attract a disproportionate number of migrants and low-income ethnic minorities, the ‘white’ or ‘citizen’ inhabitants experience multiple fears, chiefly of losing what little they have.” (Standing 2011: 176). Standing’s verdict is damning, but he does not place *blame* on these potential ‘loose cannons’. Instead, he blames the neoliberal elite who have robbed those people of their identities onto which they are desperate to cling. Being critical, then, perhaps he would have been better referring to the elite as the *real* ‘dangerous’ class.

However, despite all of this, Standing remains somewhat optimistic that the precariat will not create this inferno and instead create ‘a politics of paradise’. Key to this is a division between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (despite initially saying it would be ‘oversimplifying’ to divide the precariat into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ precariat), which Standing (2011: 182-3) describes and qualifies as:

“It is oversimplifying to divide it into a ‘good’ precariat and a ‘bad’ one. However, there is a part that wants to confront the insecurities within policies and institutions to redistribute security and provide opportunities for all to develop their talents. This part, probably overwhelmingly youth, does not look back fondly to the labourist employment security of the pre-globalisation era. The ‘bad’ precariat, by contrast, is fuelled by nostalgia for an imagined golden age. It is angry and bitter, seeing governments bailing out banks and bankers, giving subsidies to favoured elites and the salariat, and allowing inequality to rise, at their expense. It is drawn to populist neo-fascism, lashing out at governments and demonising those who seem favoured by them. Unless the aspirations of the ‘good’ precariat are addressed, more will be dragged into the circles of the ‘bad’.”
(Standing 2011: 182-3)

It is with this ‘good’ precariat that Standing holds hope that this ‘class’ will transform society for the better. He pleads with the precariat not to reject multiculturalism and to become a ‘class-for-itself’ and to ‘make a nuisance of itself’. Standing believes that one of the greatest forces in creating this ‘politics of paradise’ is ecological issues, which he argues will become the key issue that the precariat will care about.

Standing (2014: 138) argues that there are three ‘overlapping struggles’ for the precariat:

- Struggle for recognition;
- Struggle for representation;
- Struggle for redistribution.

These three struggles are of particular importance to chapter 6 of this thesis, where the politics of the participants is the focus. However, they are not only important for empirical questions, but also as conceptual markers of class formation. The idea of recognition being important relates to whether the precariat constitutes itself as a distinct social class; representation relates to how a precariat political voice might emerge (an extremely important

point in chapter 6 and the final discussion in chapter 7); and, redistribution addresses the material stakes of class politics. Taken together, they provide a framework that aids my thesis in examining whether the precariat is best understood as a class-in-the-making, a class-in-itself, or no more than a relevant sociological grouping (which in my contention).

To conclude, Standing argues that it is for the left-wing/progressive political parties to *offer* a ‘politics of paradise’, if a ‘politics of inferno’ is to be avoided and argues that “The precariat is not victim, villain or hero - it is just a lot of us.” (Standing 2011: 212-3). Perhaps referring to the precariat as ‘dangerous’ in the title of his book was not the best terminology. Standing argues that the best option to achieve a ‘politics of paradise’ is a Universal Basic Income (UBI) (Standing 2020). But, due to the divide between the small-remaining proletariat and the precariat, he believes that the proletariat will attempt to block UBI, as it will go against their short-term interests. Here, Standing fails to recognise the close links between the traditional working-class and his so-called ‘precariat’.

Three years after *The Precariat* was published, Standing published a follow-up: *A Precariat Charter* (2014). In this book, Standing focuses on how the precariat are having their citizenship eroded and are becoming ‘denizens’: “They are having rights associated with citizenship whittled away, often without realising it if realising the full implications. Many are joining the precariat, an emerging class characterised by chronic insecurity, detached from old norms of labour and the working class.” (Standing 2014: 1).

Moreover, in this book Standing’s argument evolves, and he claims that many of the precariat do not even desire secure labour. They have given up on that possibility altogether. This, he argues, is a key point in their separation from the old proletariat. The precariat, unlike the old proletariat, must be available for work 24/7. This argument about the lack of desire for stable work has worrying similarities with Murray’s (1989) theorised ‘underclass’, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

One final and important aspect of Standing’s theory is his depiction of the ‘precariatized mind’. Standing (2011) argues that the modern internet culture and lifestyle is changing the way the precariat think and act, to the advantage of those above the precariat in the class structure. The short-termism of internet content, Standing (2011: 22) argues, is damaging the

precariat's ability to, "[...] reason through complex processes and to create new ideas and ways of imagining."

On the next page you will see Figure 5, a typology of the precariat. It provides some context before the next few sections of this chapter which discuss adaptations of Standing's (2011) theory. It displays that, while each major theorist views the precariat in similar ways, they also have major differences in terms of placement in a class-based hierarchy and in terms of divisions within the precariat. For example, it is only Savage (2013; 2015) who places the precariat at the *bottom* of his schema. Moreover, while Standing (2011) divides the precariat into gridders and groaners, as well into atavists, nostalgics and progressives, Foti (2017) speaks of a 'cognitive' precariat and a 'service' precariat. Understanding these differences is important for placing the contribution of this thesis in context, as well as the sampling process for this thesis' case study.

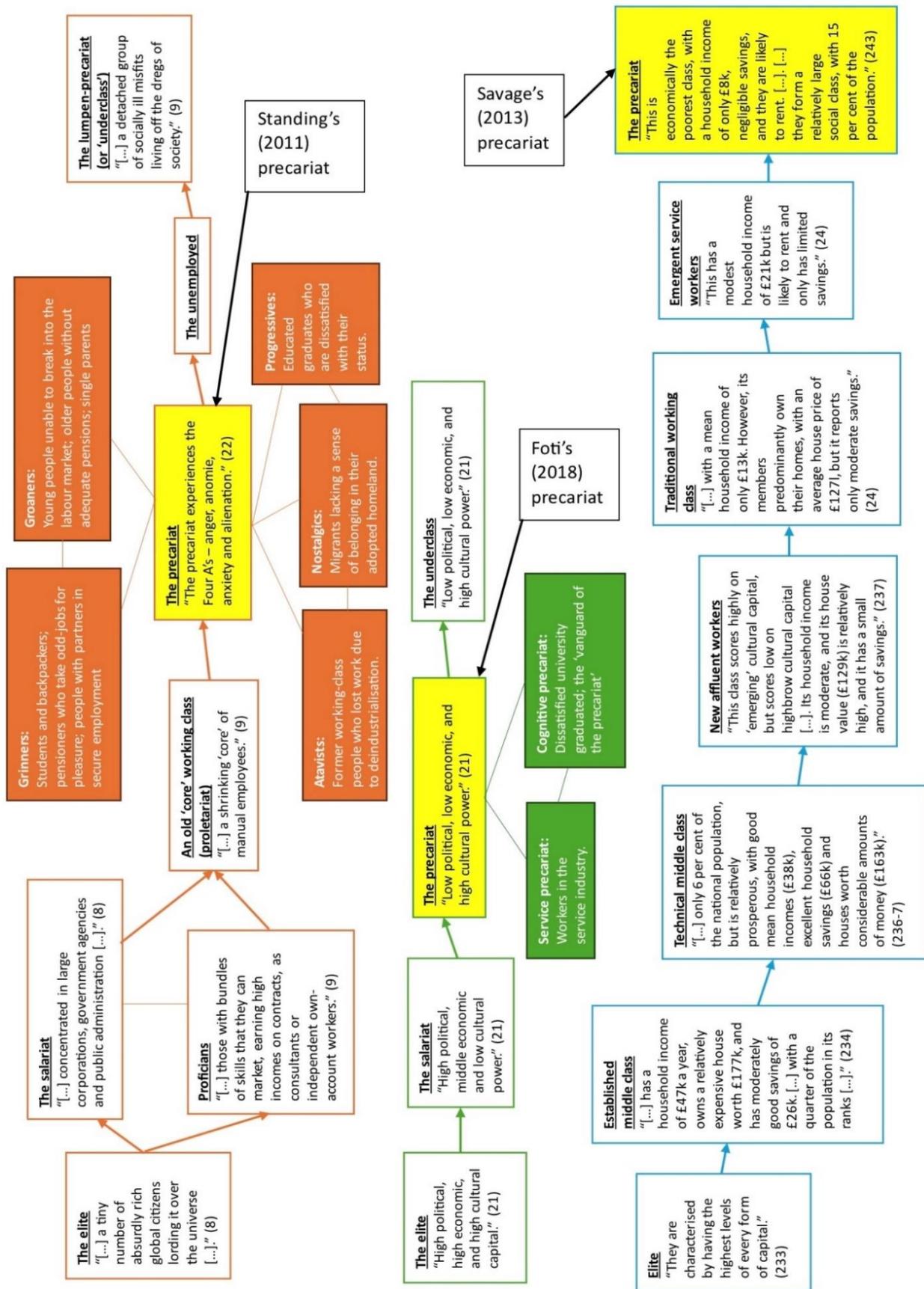


Figure 5: A typology of the most prevalent theories of the precariat, displaying the lack of consensus in how the term is utilised.

2.5 Adaptations and criticisms of Standing's precariat

This section provides a rich overview of the many adaptations of Standing's (2011) theory and the various criticisms too. This is important for this thesis as it displays how disparate ideas of the precariat are and goes some way to showing why doing research on the precariat is so difficult. With so many competing ideas about who even belongs in this 'class', choosing a sample population and case study is a difficult task.

2.5.1 Foti's adaptation

“Depressions favour the crystallisation of new classes. Just as the industrial proletariat emerged from the crises of the Second Industrial Revolution, the postindustrial precariat has emerged from the crises of the Third Industrial Revolution, brought about by the exponential diffusion of digital and network technologies. However, unlike the industrial proletariat, which was poor in terms of cultural capital but held a lot of political capital, the informational precariat is rich in terms of cultural capital, but lacking in political capital.” (Foti 2017: 104)

Foti, the co-author of the 'Middlesex Declaration of Europe's Precariat' mentioned earlier in this chapter, was a major figure in the global justice movements of the early 2000s. This chapter will display how his *General Theory of the Precariat* (2017), a blend of Standing's earlier conceptualisation and his own activist experiences, places emphasis on those from more traditionally middle-class backgrounds – the young and university-educated, in particular.

Foti (2017) places the precariat third in his four-tier class structure:

- The elite;
- The salariat;
- The precariat;
- The underclass.

Like Standing, Foti does not argue that the precariat is the *lowest* class in society. However, unlike Standing, who places a ‘*lumpen-precariat*’ below the precariat, Foti refers to an ‘underclass’. This is a strange choice of terminology, with such negative connotations associated to the term ‘underclass’. None the less, it is *with* the underclass who Foti argues the precariat need to form an alliance, with the young precariat as the organisers and educators of the underclass. However, he later makes the following point:

“The precariat has already managed to wage creative and impassioned battle. Precarious creatives gave rise to the EuroMayDay networks in the 2000s, which acted as a masthead for temps, intermittents, queers, and migrants across Europe, while the precarious underclass exploded in the mega-riots that took place in Paris (2005) and London (2010).” (Foti 2017: 105).

Throughout the *General Theory*, Foti seems confused. He starts by stating that the underclass is a separate class but later refers to a ‘precarious underclass’ without explaining why their precarity does not also make them part of the precariat. There is a hierarchical distinction between the well-educated youth from what would have formerly been regarded as ‘middle-class’ backgrounds, and the children of former/present proletarians.

Foti is very hopeful for the political future of the precariat, arguing that it is the precariat who will ‘topple the oligarchy’ and do-away with capitalism. He does not share Standing’s concern that the precariat may be an easy target for right-wing populist politicians. Foti believes

that a new left-wing populism will emerge with support of the precariat. Foti (2017: 11) also argues that the precariat is naturally-anarchist, “[...] in their refusal of authority and their striving for freedom of personal development or expression untainted by government, or corporate, control.”

Foti focuses on how the children of the formerly-established middle class are the new precariat – they are overly qualified and exploited. Moreover, they are young. “Tahir, Sol, and Occupy Wall Street were the three topical moments of the 2011 people’s revolution. Each of these movement were incubated, and led, by the vanguard of the precariat: young university graduates without a job, and young professionals saddled with a precarious one.” (Foti 2017: 107). This middle-class view of the precariat is shared by Banki (2013: 68): “[...] the contemporary ‘naming’ of the precariat arguably comes about through the cultural capital of the middle classes enabling them to name their conditions as their standards of living decompose and they become exposed to the risks that are routine for so many other workers.”

Foti also coined a new term to refer to the exploitation suffered by the precariat: ‘flexploitation’, which adds a negative connotation to the neoliberal-embraced ‘flexibility’. By ‘flexploitation’ Foti is referring to ever-changing shift-patterns. One week a worker could have full-time hours, the next they may have no hours at all. Foti highlights how this aspect of precarity could lead to mental health issues, related to stress and social exclusion.

Foti (2017: 26) is clear that the precariat should be deemed a class, in the Marxian sense:

“The precariat is a generation in the process of becoming a general class in the Marxian sense; capitalist corporations and state administrations could not function without their labour. This puts them in a league very close to that of the 20th century working class: disposable as individuals, but indispensable as an aggregate.”

However, Foti, again, seems confused in his work, as he later contradicts himself. For example, early in his work he talks about people in an underclass who are not included in the predominantly middle-class-born precariat but later provides ‘precarity rankings’: “1. Migrant;

2. Unemployed; 3. On workfare; 4. Intern; 5. Laid off; 6. Contractor; 7. Freelance; 8. Temp; 9. Short-Term Part-Time; 10. Long-term Full-Time” (Foti 2017: 35). It’s also not made clear how he feels that this ranking is helpful, as many in this ranking could also fall into his definition of an ‘underclass’.

Moreover, Foti (2017:129) divides the precariat in two:

“We can distinguish a service precariat (working at Wal-Mart, Amazon, Uber, McDonald’s, etc.) and a cognitive precariat (such as those engaging in struggles of the Graduate Employees and Student Organisation since the mid-90s), but what is most important to recognise is the emergence of the precariat as a class in the making, a class that is becoming a class for itself through the exploits of the 2011 revolutions, the global social mobilisations against austerity and inequality, and currently against right-wing populism.”

In Foti’s distinction, it is the cognitive precariat who will play the most important role in galvanising the rest of the precariat, and the underclass, in left-wing populist anarchist uprisings. This wording is problematic to say the least – are those in the underclass not ‘cognitive’? This is incredibly dehumanising language.

Politically, Foti (2017) argues the precariat have found new ways to organise. Traditional workplaces and social spaces where the proletariat found strength-in-numbers and working-class identity have largely disappeared with deindustrialisation. However, Foti believes this is not a problem, and sees social media as the precariat’s alternative. One could argue that this excludes a lot of the more elderly members of the precariat and those who are not as active in online spaces. However, this is clearly not considered a problem for Foti, as he argues that the transformational wing of the precariat are the young Europeans, who have access to the internet. Moreover, for many class-commentators deindustrialisation and the demise of the community hubs related to industrial communities was a huge issue for proletarian political organising. This quote from Foti (2017: 16) is an argument for why he thinks this is not a significant issue:

“The factory was no longer the central site for class conflict; the city, the mall, and the web had taken its place. We saw a new class emerging, composed of women, immigrants, working class youth, middle-class youth, cleaners, and hackers, and we imagined it would soon eclipse the political priorities of an aging generation of blue- and white-collars. The precariat was destined to be the gravedigger of neoliberalism.”

Foti (2017: 45) also argues that: “The politicisation of the precariat has occurred over three seminal issues: the politics of partying, the fight against fascism and racism, and more recently, youth unemployment and the accompanying protests against corrupt elites engendering this.” This demonstrates a clear distinction with the proletariat, where political conflict was based on labour rights, predominantly. Foti actively neglects any attempts to merge the issues facing the traditional working-class with the issues facing his precariat.

Going further, Foti (2017:59) argues that: “Thatcher – also known as ‘the Iron Lady’ – managed to erase one of the strongest, and oldest, working-class cultures of the world.” This is a highly contentious point of view. It’s obvious where he has come to this conclusion, with the effects of Thatcherism discussed earlier in this chapter, as organised labour has been largely diminished. However, to say she erased a working-class culture is far from being a consensus point-of-view – it fails to recognise how class-cultures are shared and reproduced over generations (an overview of Bourdieu later in this chapter will be employed to support this cultural understanding of class).

He (2017: 117) moves on to argue that we are witnessing the end of neoliberalism, ‘at the hands of xenophobic and inegalitarian forces’. However, he believes that the only force that can fight against racism and fascism is the precariat. The impetus is on precariat leaders on social media to ‘build an anti-fascist, anti-racist, and populist front’. This ‘front’, he (2017: 117) argues, can no longer rely on the ‘red left’ of old, who are “[...] essentially a defensive, and ultimately conservative, posture that will end in certain defeat.”, as it; fails to acknowledge the precariat and focuses on the working class. “The precariat needs to look elsewhere for its ideological arsenal, namely, populism, feminism, and environmentalism. Red is dead, but pink

is very much alive.” (Foti 2017: 120-1). It is unclear why Foti is so divisive, making essentialist claims about the so-called ‘red left’. Surely, an inclusive precariat would be more successful?

Foti’s adaptation of Standing’s theory does offer some strong opposition to Standing. He argues that Standing focused too much attention on non-immigrants and middle-aged people. Moreover, he argues that Standing failed to realise the nature of the precariat’s political views, which are anti-fascism and anti-racism. However, Foti writes from the perspective of a middle-class and young activist, disinterested in the continued prominence of working-class cultures and issues. Moreover, his definition and use of the precariat is of its time and overstates the long term impact of this group in terms of class politics.

2.5.2 Johannessen’s adaptation

Johannessen (2020) argues that the precariat is a separate sociological grouping from ‘the working poor’. However – unlike Standing (2011) who places a ‘*lumpen-precariat*’ *below* the precariat in a class-structure, and Foti (2017) who places an ‘underclass’ *below* the precariat in his class-structure – Johannessen argues that ‘the working poor’ are a group *alongside* the precariat. However, he does go on to state that we are creating a ‘global underclass’. Moreover, Johannessen (2020: 6) is less inclined to refer to the precariat as a ‘class’, stating that, “Members of the precariat do not see themselves as a social class.”

Johannessen (2020) believes there are four separate groups who make up the precariat:

- The underemployed: These are people with a high level of education who are reliant on short-term contracts, despite being in a position to apply for high-paying jobs on permanent contracts. Due to a high amount of people being ‘underemployed’, when high-paying contracts do become available they are in competition with hundreds, if not thousands, of applicants – meaning that most of them remain in the precariat.

- The underpaid: These are young graduates who work temporary and low-paying jobs when they first enter the job-market. This group are frustrated that their education has not provided a well-paid job, as they were promised.
- Knowledge entrepreneurs: These are people with specialist expertise (good MA or PhD) who do get paid well for their work. However, they rely on short-term contracts.
- Vagabond workers: These are migrants or people with disabilities who, despite having a high level of education, do not get secure employment because of their status as either migrants or as people with disabilities.

The working-poor, by contrast, tend to have a low-level of education and only maintain a position above poverty by working multiple jobs. These can be migrant workers but are most often nationals. The working-poor suffer from loneliness and exclusion, tending to live among other working-poor people and utilising the same services. Johannessen (2020) lists the following five reasons as to why the working poor remain in such a position:

- Neoliberalism exploits competition between workers, in order to keep wages low;
- The working-poor experience ‘political apathy’ – linking with the earlier-mentioned theory of ‘post-democracy’;
- Low number of trade union membership;
- Robotisation of working life, meaning that less-and-less jobs are available;
- A lack of education.

What is clear from Johannessen’s (2020) definitions is that the individuals in the precariat tend to have more middle-class identities, having had a more formal education. This divide is very similar to those expressed by Standing (2011; 2014) and Foti (2017).

2.5.3 Marxist critiques

Marx's theory of class is best understood as a theory of history (Bottomore 1955), and that history is one of inevitable conflict between classes (Morris 1979): "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." (Marx and Engels 1848: 2). In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx (ibid.: 2) argues that these conflicts, between the oppressors and the oppressed, always end in a "[...] revolutionary reconstruction of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes." Moreover, Marx argued that classes were based on an economic relationship, and that alone was the only basis for class-creation (Scase 1992).

Therefore, in the traditional Marxist conceptualisation, class has nothing to do with a cultural identity – class is something you do, your position in the labour market (Atkinson 2015). Therefore, a good definition of a Marxian class is: "[...] as collectivities standing in common relationships to the means of production [...]" (Roberts, Cook, Clark and Semeonoff 1977: 17). While Standing's (2011) precariat differs from Marx's proletariat, they are both predominantly defined by their economic relationships.

Moreover, one of the most notable aspects of Marxism, and perhaps why his conception of class became so popular, was his utopian vision – that class conflict would, inevitably, lead to communism (Roberts 2011). But how? There is a common misconception that Marx believed that Britain was a two-class society. Marx discussed many more classes in his work, such as the petite bourgeoisie and the *lumpenproletariat*. However, Marxists believe that a process of proletarianisation and class consciousness will, inevitably, lead to the proletariat being the major class, to which members of other classes will eventually join, and a conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie will ensue (Collins 1975; Atkinson 2015). Marx gave examples of this in his *Communist Manifesto* (ibid.: 6) where he discusses middle-class professions entering the proletariat, "It [the bourgeois class] has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers." Edgell (1993) provides an overview of the proletarianisation process, summarised below:

1. The proletariat will increase in size (as the bourgeoisie capitalists will require more workers).
2. The proletariat will be concentrated in small industrial areas (as the factory is the industrial mode-of-production).
3. The proletariat will experience relative poverty (as the oppressors maximise profit).

This, Marxists argue, will lead to class consciousness. Mann (1973) provides an overview of the process of class consciousness, summarised below:

1. Class identity (the proletariat define themselves).
2. Class opposition (the proletariat recognise the bourgeoisie as the opposing class).
3. Class totality (the proletariat recognise the first two factors as defining factors in their wellbeing and lives).
4. Alternative society (the proletariat become revolutionary, seeking communism).

There have been many issues faced by Marxists, with these processes seeming less likely over time. For example, the continued strength and growth of the middle class, they are proletarians in the Marxist sense but have developed very different cultural attitudes and do not form a proletarian class-consciousness (Bottomore 1955). Neo-Marxists wrestle with understanding why Marxism has not come to fruition, with new understandings of hegemony (*most notably* Gramsci 1971) and new structures (*notably* Wright 2015), but a traditional Marxist understanding of class is still relevant. For example, the word ‘precariat’ has roots in the Marxist term ‘proletariat’ and the process of ‘precarisation’ is, while being a different process, akin to proletarianisation.

Bieler (2013) reviews *The Precariat* and concludes that, while the book is a useful resource, the denotation of the precariat as a ‘class’ is flawed. He makes this argument on the basis that the members of the precariat are in the same position as those in the proletariat with stable employment and those in the salariat with stable employment – they all *have to* sell their labour power due to their lacking in ownership of the means of production. This is a classical

Marxist argument which allows even typical middle-class professionals to be included in the proletariat, let alone those in positions of precarity as described by Standing. Moreover, Bieler argues that Standing is damaging the chance of positive social change by focusing on the differences between these groups, instead of highlighting their commonalities. Bieler (ibid.: 325) summarises his argument: “Exploitation is rooted in the way capitalist social relations of production are set up. Ending exploitation of the precariat, as is the case with any other workers, therefore requires a change in these social relations of production.”

Murphy (2015: 42-43) adds to the discussion of the precariat as being a class in a Marxian sense:

“[...] Marx’s name [‘proletariat’] emphasises the active power of the political subject while Standing’s emphasises its powerlessness and passivity, to the extent that we could even say that Standing’s name paradoxically turns the political subject into a political object that is acted upon but does not act for itself.”

Palmer (2013) also challenges the notion of a ‘precariat’ class, from a Marxist perspective. He supports Bieler’s argument that the depiction and description of the precariat as a separate class only serves to fragment the proletariat, and that theorists should instead be creative in their understandings of how the proletariat has changed. He (ibid.: 49) points to E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, “[...] with its accounts of proto-industrialization, and outworkers, field labourers, declining crafts, ‘Church and King mobs’, opaque societies of machine-breakers, the denizens of ‘Satan’s Strongholds’ and metropolitan artisans”, that indicates there is nothing *new* in recognising that the working-class is fragmented, and that referring to the precariat as a separate class rather than a fragmentation within the working-class is unhelpful politically. Moreover, Palmer makes the point that labour has always been insecure and precarious, even if it seemed less so during the post-war era directly preceding neoliberalism and the genesis of Standing’s precariat.

Palmer (ibid.: 57) offers this strong conclusion:

“Once it is grasped that all proletarians suffer precariousness, and all of those constrained by precariousness in their working lives are indeed proletarians or have interests that coincide directly with this class of the dispossessed, it is clear that there are expanding possibilities for more effective politics based on class struggles in our times.”

Wright’s Marxist Critique

Eric Olin Wright’s *Understanding Class* (2015) devotes an entire chapter to the question: ‘Is the Precariat a Class?’ He (2015: 173) concludes that, while it is a legitimate sociological grouping, it should not be treated as a distinct class in its own right, concluding that, “[...] treating the precariat as a class – even as a class-in-the-making – obscures more than it clarifies.”

Wright’s argument is built around the idea of the ‘rules of the game’ theory. Wright recognises that in the current ‘rules of the game’, which are shaped by neoliberalism, the two groups, the precariat and the working-class, are distinct. However, he dismisses the recognition of the precariat as a class because they and the working-class would both be positively affected if the rules of the game were changed to socialism. Wright (2015) focuses on Standing’s (2014) *Precariat Charter* in his analysis. He (2015: 169) looks at the 29 articles in the ‘charter’ and argues that all of the material gains that would benefit the precariat from the 29 articles would also benefit the working-class: “The material conditions of life for people in both locations within capitalism would be enhanced in an alternative economy build around various forms of social ownership, democratic empowerment over broad investment priorities, an expansive sector of decommodified public goods, a cooperative form of market regulations, and the other components of democratic socialism.”

Wright is somewhat more optimistic about the role the precariat will play in the overthrow of capitalism, than Standing is, despite not believing they constitute a class. He argues that they are the group with the ‘sharpest grievances against capitalism’, therefore will be important in overthrowing capitalism.

2.5.4 Wacquant’s Bordieuan critique

“[...] the precariat is a *category that cannot be realised* as such in practice.” (Wacquant 2022: 166).

Another prominent theorist who has dedicated a section of a book to critiquing the notion of the precariat as a class is Loïc Wacquant, in *The Invention of the “Underclass”* (2022). Wacquant worked closely with Pierre Bourdieu and uses a Bordieuan lens to critique the theory. This is important for this thesis, as Bourdieu’s theoretical framework is used to inform Savage’s (2015) adaptation of Standing’s precariat (which will be discussed later in this chapter and used in the methodology chapter to define a sample research population).

Wacquant believes that the precariat should be thought of as a ‘vulnerable fraction of the working class’, because they often *come from* the working-class and have aspirations to re-join it – and do so when they experience upward mobility. Moreover, members of the established working-class always carry the risk of sinking into the precariat and, therefore, also experience precarity, even when in fairly secure employment. “Precarity is a matter of degree and not kind.” (Wacquant 2022: 166). This is in contradiction to Standing (2011; 2014), Foti (2017) and Johannessen (2020), who show more connections between the precariat and the traditional middle-class.

Wacquant (2022: 165) is also critical of Standing for referring to the precariat as a ‘global-class’, failing to recognise, “[...] economic legacies and structural dynamics that are too disparate to be encompassed by the same notion.” This criticism is supported by others. For example, Munck (2013) is highly critical of Standing’s theory, arguing that the theory simply,

“Captures some of the feelings among [global] Northern academics.” but that it is totally irrelevant for the those in the global South. For the majority of people in the global South, precarity is not a new phenomenon at all: “From a Southern perspective work has always-already been precarious, a basic fact which unsettles the notion that something new has been discovered.” (2013: 752). This is somewhat echoed by Furlong (2015), who argues that Standing’s theory of a precariat as a class represents middle-class grievances but not the reality of class inequality, which only serves to obscure the exploitation suffered by many. Bessant (2018) supports this view, recognising that age is not a signifier of class, so a middle-class university graduate should not be deemed as part of the precariat, when their precarious working conditions are likely to be temporary (*see also* MacDonald 2017).

Wacquant (2022: 165) concludes strongly by referring to the precariat as a ‘still-born group’, “[...] devoid of the minimal cohesion needed to accede to collective existence and engage in sustained coordinated action.” He argues that when the precariat mobilise it is to *escape* their position, unlike the industrial proletariat who mobilised to strengthen their position and created a strong sense of identity through their class. The proletariat wants a voice, whereas the precariat wants an exit.

Wacquant (2022) is arguing against the denotation of the ‘precariat’ as a *class* but is still somewhat ‘cautiously’ in favour of it, conceptually, as he places it in opposition to the ‘underclass’ name that is often given to the same people: “It [the word ‘precariat’] is semantically clear and compact as well as free of moral connotations and political overtones [...]” (Wacquant 2022: 164). This recognition of the ‘precariat’ being ‘free of moral connotations’ will be challenged in the conclusion of this thesis.

2.5.5 Other critiques

One of the main criticisms of Standing’s work is that the individuals who make up the precariat are far too disparate in their identities for them to be considered a class. The following two quotes are similar in their criticisms:

“Despite their polar experiences, we are to accept that the relationship to capital of a retired teacher supplementing a pension by giving summer-school lessons and that of a migrant worker cleaning houses below minimum wage for cash-in-hand are similarly precarious.” (Lawlor 2015: 152)

“Not only is it absurd to mix professions such as freelance translators, graphic designers and writers with seasonal workers in sectors such as agriculture and hospitality in the ‘precariat’; the distinction between the ‘traditional working class’ and the precariat only determines an artificial conceptual fragmentation within the social classes penalized by capitalism.” (Di Bernardo 2016: 13)

Shildrick, MacDonald, Webster and Garthwaite analysed Standing’s theory of the precariat in *Poverty and Insecurity* (2012). In this research, the authors interviewed families who have members in long-term unemployment, to challenge the myth that some families have become reliant and accepting of a life without work and on welfare. While they agreed with Standing’s (2011) general depiction of the changes of work-culture through deindustrialisation, they were critical of his view that precarious working conditions can lead to an apathy towards work and work-ethic: “Our study found that *despite* work insecurity and a barrage of exhortations from welfare agencies and employers, individuals hold on to strong work motivation and work identity.” (2012: 26). The work displays the clear lack of empirical knowledge informing Standing’s (2014) theory.

Standing’s work also fails to recognise how precarisation has been affective on all areas of life, not just the workplace (Hogg 2021). McRobbie (2011) argues that failure to look beyond the workplace is to ignore an intersectional and multidimensional view of politics, where struggles for identity have become of paramount importance, politically, over the past few decades.

There is also an argument that focusing purely on neoliberalism as the basis for the emergence of a precariat weakened Standing’s argument, leading to under-informed theory (Bessant 2018). Munck (2013) argues that Standing’s history of neoliberalism is not sufficient

context for the precariat. Instead, the entire history of capitalism and earlier theories are relevant given that they have attempted to understand those at the margins of capitalism – such as Marx’s *lumpenproletariat*. This is linked to another criticism: precarity is not *new*. Rather, the current process of precarisation is a: “[...] return to the pre-Fordist and pre-welfare-state labour conditions.” (Di Bernardo 2016: 9).

Moreover, another issue with Standing’s work is the vocabulary used throughout (such as ‘groaners’, referred to earlier) but, more importantly, in the book’s title. Munck (2013) deplores Standing’s use of the word ‘dangerous’ in describing the precariat, and questions if ‘frightening the ruling classes’ is a legitimate strategy for social transformation. This is a legitimate criticism, as Standing’s terminology is unhelpful and sensationalist.

Munck (2013: 751-2) also criticises Standing’s inconsistent view of the precariat as a class:

“The precariat is defined more or less by what it is not – a mythical, stable working class with full social and political rights – and by its vague feelings of anomie and distance from the orthodox labour movement. At a certain point Standing becomes aware that this is quite a weak basis on which to construct a new class and he then retreats to treating it as a class in the making.”

This lack of conviction in Standing’s work is frustrating and only serves to more-obscure the term. This argument is supported by Bremen (2013), who refers to Standing’s precariat as a ‘bogus concept’. Bremen argues that it is harmful to the working-class by creating unnecessary divisions which will only make its position weaker, and not tackle the issues of the labour market, where flexibility has cheapened the price of labour. He (2013: 132) believes that those who Standing is referring to are actually ‘classic proletarians’, “[...] stripped of the means of subsistence and with no option but to sell that labour power in order to survive.” Hardy (2017: 270) supports this view, “Standing’s juxtaposition of the precariat and the organised working class serves to place an unhelpful wedge between the two.”

Frase (2013) also takes issue with Standing: “Standing’s definition is entirely negative, based in what people in precarious labor *lack*. To be coherent and meaningful, however, the notion of class must have a positive content and an economic role.” (2013: 12). Frase does believe that Standing’s theory is helpful for our understanding of how the working class has changed, but to deem it as an entirely separate class is unhelpful. Miller (2010: 97) also challenges the idea that the precariat is a class-in-itself by discussing how nearly every industry has now accepted precarious jobs as part of its structure: “What used to be the fate of artists and musicians – where “making cool stuff” and working with relative autonomy was meant to outweigh ongoing employment – has become a norm across virtually every sector of the economy.” Moreover, Miller challenges the assumption that all of the precariat are lacking in privilege and gives recognition that *actually* flexibility, or the ability to be flexible, is often a sign of affluence. For example, a singer-songwriter with wealthy parents who support them financially is choosing to be flexible, but would be categorised, by Standing, as part of the precariat.

Banki (2013) also gives recognition to the precariat but dismisses claims that they are a new class. However, she (2013: 67) dismisses some of the criticisms above which argue that the precariat is a fraction of the working class:

“[The precariat] is not necessarily part of the ‘working class’ or the ‘proletariat’ but instead consists of social ‘classes’ on either side of the proletariat – both highly educated and motivated creative workers struggling to find secure employment, on the one hand, and a *lumpen proletariat*-minus-stability, on the other hand.”

The quote above perfectly sums up my frustration with the theory and the difficulty with analysing the precariat: there are so many different theories about *who they are* in relation to other classes with Banki (2013) concluding some are better-off than the traditional working-class and some are worse-off than the traditional working-class. Furthermore, the various theories cover such a wide range of social, economic, and cultural identities, that understandings of the precariat are too broad to represent a sufficiently coherent category of common economic and cultural experiences. Masquelier (2019) adds to this criticism and

dismisses Standing's assumption that the precariat has the ability or capacity to challenge their precarious position, due to the highly diverse nature of the precariat. Furthermore, Hardy (2017: 263) argues that, "[...] precarious work is intrinsic to capitalism and therefore the precariat cannot be understood as a class-in-itself.", and that there are so many different forms of precarity that it is impossible for a 'precariat' to become a group in solidarity (*see also* Gill & Pratt 2008).

In conclusion, this thesis supports the following four broad areas of weakness in Standing's (2011) theory:

- The global nature of the precariat, which emphasises global labour markets over national class cultures and identities. This aligns with a Bourdieuan understanding of class, which gives recognition to cultural capital which is not global. Referring to a global precariat diminishes the existence of unique class cultures that exist within nations. It also fails to recognise that in many countries, those with far higher rates of absolute poverty than Great Britain, precarity is a norm and by no means a *new* phenomenon;
- The precariat should be recognised as a relevant and useful sociological grouping, but not as a distinct social class-in-the-making, a class-*in-itself*, or, as a class-*for-itself*;
- The inflammatory and derogatory language employed by Standing, such as 'dangerous' and 'groaning';
- The lack of conviction in Standing's work, where he is unclear on whether the precariat is a class-in-the-making, a class-*in-itself*, or even, as a class-*for-itself*.

2.6 Savage's adaptation of the precariat

One adaptation of Standing's theory not-yet mentioned is Mike Savage's (2015) 'precariat' in *Social Class in the 21st Century*. This adaptation of Standing's theory is the most influential adaptation so far, and is the definition used for identifying participants for this doctoral research. Savage utilised Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of cultural and social capitals, as well as

economic capitals, when coming up with his seven-tier class-structure, which had the precariat as its *lowest* class. The first half of this section will provide an overview of Bourdieu's relevant theory on 'capitals', before focusing on Savage's adaption of the precariat.

2.6.1 Bourdieu's 'capitals'

“In all areas it [job insecurity] produces more or less identical effects, which become particularly visible in the extreme case of the unemployed: the destructuring of existence, which is deprived among other things of its temporal structures, and the ensuing deterioration of the whole relationship to the world, time and space. Casualization profoundly affects the person who suffers it: by making the whole future uncertain, it prevents all rational anticipation and, in particular, the basic belief and hope in the future that one needs in order to rebel, especially collectively, against present conditions, ever the most intolerable.” (Bourdieu 1997: 82)

The most relevant aspect of Bourdieu's theoretical framework (as it is the part of Bourdieu's work most utilised in Savage's (2015) class structure) for this thesis is capital, which Crossley (2014: 86) summarises as: “Power and dominance derive not only from possession of material resources but also from possession of cultural and social resources.”

Bourdieu's 'capitals' refer to the different forms of resources or assets that individuals possess and can use to gain social advantage. Bourdieu identified several types of capitals:

- Economic capital: This refers to financial resources such as money, property, and other assets that can be used to acquire goods and services. Economic capital is the form of capital most-often associated with class distinctions, but, according to Bourdieu, it is no-more important than the next two.
- Cultural capital: This includes knowledge, skills, education, and cultural tastes that individuals acquire through socialisation and education. It can be further divided into

embodied cultural capital (internalised knowledge and skills) and objectified cultural capital (cultural objects such as books, artwork, etc.). The dominant class are able to legitimise *their* culture and therefore earn more cultural capital, as they are in control of the institutions which perpetuate this.

- Social capital: This refers to the networks, relationships, and social connections that individuals have. It includes the social resources and support that can be accessed through these networks. Bourdieu saw social capital as very negative, as it allows the privileged and powerful to use their connections to maintain their interests (i.e., the interests of the dominant class).

Bourdieu argued that these different forms of capital interact with each other and contribute to an individual's social position and ability to navigate and succeed in society. Members of the working class, with little capital, must develop a 'taste for necessity'. Members of the dominant class, on the other hand, have a great deal of capital. They can use this capital to gain symbolic capital, which is the prestige, recognition, and reputation that individuals or groups possess. It is often derived from the other forms of capital and can be used to gain social status and power. Savage (2015: 95) sums this up here:

“[...] while there may be limitless types of cultural activity, ranging from gardening through to visiting the British Museum, watching *Big Brother*, or playing computer games, not all are valued *equally*. Some forms carry a cachet that is cultivated and reinforced by influential people and institutions. And, where such forms are legitimate, they can generate resources and advantages.”

2.6.2 Savage's definition of the precariat

“This is economically the poorest class, with a household income of only £8k, negligible savings, and they are likely to rent. Their social range is small with an

average of seven contacts whose mean status is the lowest of any of the classes. [...] they form a relatively large social class, with 15 per cent of the population. [...] It's members are unlikely to have attended university. Occupationally they are over-represented amongst the unemployed, van drivers, cleaners, carpenters, care workers, cashiers and postal workers, and they also include shopkeepers.” (Savage et al. 2013: 243)

This above quote is perhaps the fullest definition, from Savage, of his adaptation of the precariat. What is notable is that, unlike Standing and Foti, Savage does not place as high an importance on links between the old established middle-class and the precariat. Moreover, he does not argue that there is a class *below* the precariat.

However, Savage does agree with Standing (2011) that the precariat is a ‘dangerous’ and ‘angry’ class, due to their lack of voice in public conversations and representation in politics. Moreover, Savage argues that they make up 15% of the British population. This has led to the precariat attempting to ‘hide from view’ to avoid the stigma they face.

Savage analysed the economic, cultural, and social capital of his participants to find distinctions based on tastes. He (2015: 336-7) concludes that: “[...] the cultural practices of the working-class are not only described as ‘tasteless’, but are also pathologized, encoded as immoral, wrong and criminal. This leads to a situation where the working-class in general, and the precariat in particular, are defined as ‘lacking’ culture, as not measuring up to ‘respectable’ standards.”

Below is Savage's (2013; 2015) complete class schema:

- Elite;
- Established middle class;
- Technical middle class;
- New affluent workers;
- Traditional working class;
- Emergent service workers; and
- Precariat.

Savage (2015) created this structure based on research called the Great British Class Survey (GBCS), which used a latent class analysis, similar to the methodology utilised by Bourdieu in *Distinction* (1984). This survey took data on household income, savings, and house value to give participants a score for economic capital. It also gave scores to different types of cultural capital (e.g., going to the theatre would score 'high' and listening to rap music would score 'low') and scores based on social capital based on social ties (e.g., having friends who are lawyers would score 'high' and having friends who are cleaners would score 'low'). This led to the development of the 'class calculator', a BBC website where people could answer some questions and find out which class they belonged to. Interestingly, Savage (2015) discusses how the GBCS was 'sucked into the vortex of hate', with people unhappy to be classified in the precariat. One could argue that this is a very good argument for why the label 'precariat' is unhelpful, as people clearly did not resonate with the term.

Savage's 'class calculator' was met with criticism, as it did not ask for the participants' occupations, just the occupations they knew. So, if a care worker was friends with a doctor and a lawyer, they might be defined as 'established middle class'. However, if a doctor was friends with a care worker and a cleaner, they might be defined as 'emergent service workers' (Dorling 2014).

Savage does not provide a succinct definition of who is part of the precariat but does make some statements which can guide our understanding of how they are distinct. Firstly,

“They [the precariat] recognise the adversities they have encountered through their position in society, and list enduring hardships as personal achievements.” (2015: 349). This is different from other classes, who do not see hardships as providing status. Moreover, even the ways they speak and walk are scrutinised and devalued – this is a clear example of Bourdieu’s influence on Savage’s adaptation. Savage believes this is an argument for why the precariat stay among ‘their own’, seeing the precariat as very insular class.

To others, outside of the precariat: “[...] they are seen and known as old-fashioned, rigid and unable to bend to the wishes of a changing globalised market. [...]. When Britain needs a low-paid working-class – people to serve coffee, clean hotel rooms and look after their children – there are ‘better’ working class people from Italy, Poland, Nigeria or Brazil who can be enlisted instead.” (Savage 2015: 352). Savage goes on to state that the average age of the precariat is 50. This is different from Foti’s conception, who strongly refutes claims that the members of the precariat are old-fashioned, instead seeing them as youthful and with a newer sense of politics – ‘pink’ politics. Moreover, “Their [the precariat’s] resilience and resistance in difficult circumstances are misrecognised as crassness; their protection of their preferences is known as ‘bad taste’, and that, coupled with their sense of community is viewed as part of their bad judgment and rigidity.” (Savage 2015: 358). This recognition of how the precariat cling on to a sense of community in the hyper-individualised era, will be an important aspect of the findings in this thesis. Moreover, the recognition of the precariat’s resilience is another contradiction with Standing (2011), who argued that they are the least resilient class.

Savage’s work was praised by many but also received some heavy criticism, not too dissimilar to that faced by Standing. Notably, Mills (2014: 443) referred to it as ‘the Great British Class Fiasco’:

“Usually, classes are thought of as groups within which individuals could potentially spend the whole of their lives. However, Savage et al.’s inductive method allows classes to be distinguished by tastes and activities that have a strong age gradient. The implication is that individuals can either grow out of their class because they become too old to get down to the gym, or become stuck because of the cultural tastes they acquired during early adulthood.”

Mills (ibid.) argues that Savage's 'classes' are actually more like lifestyle groups. A university graduate from an established middle-class family can briefly enter the precariat after university. Mills argues that this is a misrecognition of what it means to be a 'class'. This is a very important criticism. While this thesis argues that Savage's adaptation is more useful and salient than Standing's original theory, this dissertation supports Mills' view that the precariat has not been sufficiently defined and it does not exist as a separate class, despite being a relevant sociological grouping.

One of the most exciting and encouraging things about Savage's work is that it did reinvigorate British conversations about class in the mainstream – making class-based sociological inquiry, like this thesis, more recognised and relevant. However, the popularity of Savage's work also came with media scrutiny. For example, Cartoonist, Martin Rowson, suggesting the names for the seven classes should be: 'our wise and beautiful masters', 'decent middle England', 'striving if frankly oikish', 'ever so slightly deserving scum', 'undeserving scum', 'freakshow scum' and 'expendable' (*cited in Dorling 2014*).

Savage's definition forms the basis for the sampling of this research, so a continued discussion of his 'precariat' will form part of the methodology chapter.

2.6.3 Critiquing Savage: an under-utilisation of Bourdieu

Bourdieu's impact on class-theory and, specifically, the precariat, has already been discussed in relation to his understanding of capital and how different levels of capital can position individuals within a class structure. However, this thesis is critical of Savage (2015) for using such a narrow understanding of Bourdieu's theoretical framework. Therefore, this brief section discusses other aspects of Bourdieu's understanding of social class formation.

Habitus

“The class habitus is nothing but this experience (in its most usual sense) which immediately reveals a hope or an ambition as reasonable or unreasonable, a particular commodity as accessible or inaccessible, a particular action as suitable or unsuitable.” (Bourdieu 1965: 5).

To Bourdieu, we are all a ‘habitus’: “[...] a product of collective history, and not an autonomous individual.” (Reed-Danahay 2005: 156). This abstract idea allows sociologists to recognise people as individuals, but inextricably linked to their group identities also. This means that one’s habitus is likely to share similarities with people with similar identity markers. This could be gender, race, place where they grew up, education, but, most importantly for Bourdieu, class (Bourdieu 1977; Reed-Danahay 2005; Friedman & Laurison 2020). Therefore, even though the contents of one’s life may differ from that of another, the structure will remain similar and, therefore, create a similar habitus, which can, at its simplest definition, be recognised in the norms and habits of individuals and groups in society (Maton 2014; Burke 2016). However, Bourdieu’s in-depth catalogue of research focused more on feelings, tastes, and even bodily postures (Reed-Danahay 2005).

The habitus has negative connotations for equality, leading children to have negative feelings about what they can achieve and what is realistic for them to achieve (in Bourdieuan terms this is known as *conatus*, referring to how people adjust their subjective expectations to match their objective chances, giving habitus its dynamic character) (Friedman & Laurison 2020; Fuller 2014). Through observing, a child will be inculcated with the habitus of its family members from a young age, learning to adopt the behaviours that are deemed “proper”. When they enter education, children are introduced to a secondary habitus, where certain things are deemed more legitimate than others.

This secondary habitus is part of the state apparatus and forms what is known as a ‘cultivated habitus’, discussed by Bourdieu in *Distinction* (1984). This is where the legitimacy of the dominant class is inculcated. Reed-Danahay (2005: 247) argues that “The school does

not act primarily, however, to teach children anything they don't already know, but to certify the knowledge of the children of the dominant class by giving them high marks, certificates and diplomas." This can often lead to working-class children accepting academic failure, as they get a negative self-image attached with not doing so 'well' as more affluent peers (Friedman & Laurison 2020).

For Bourdieu, one of the strongest senses associated with the habitus and how it enacts distinctions between classes is *taste*:

"Because one's tastes appear to be natural, those of others can seem unnatural. Class endogamy results in large part, he argued, from aversion to and intolerance of different lifestyles. Taste operates, therefore, in the boundary maintenance between social classes, and acts as a system of classification." (Reed-Danahay 2005: 110-1).

The habitus has become a very important sociological tool for understanding how classes form and are distinct from one-another. Some are hopeful that recognising and understanding habitus can lead to positive social changes. However, Costa and Murphy (2015) argue that habitus is just as much a tool for maintaining the traditional dominance of the ruling class as it is for challenging that dominance. This difference in tastes experienced by different social classes, leads to hierarchies as they signify power and class (Elliott 2009; Wacquant 1998).

Moreover, the habitus provides people with what Bourdieu (1997: 16) refers to as a '*doxa*': "[...] a set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma." In other words, it is the common-sense understandings of the world that individuals hold. Or, as Morrin (2016) refers to it: 'the pre-verbal taken-for-granted', or, as Deer (2014) refers to it: the 'pre-reflexive intuitive knowledge'.

Reed-Danahay (2005: 2) summarises the importance of the *doxa*:

"Much of Bourdieu's work was concerned with articulating the ways in which a person's social position (and the "cultural capital," or values and resources connected

to this) affects the choices he or she makes in life – from that of choosing a suitable marriage partner, to educational and career decisions, to deciding how much time should elapse before repaying a gift. For Bourdieu, these were not wholly conscious decisions or calculated decisions, but, rather, products of the *habitus* – embodied feelings and thoughts connected to commonsense understandings of the world (what he called the *doxa*) and arising from particular social positions, including those of class, gender, nationality, and ethnicity.”

Atkinson (2015) argues that our *habitus* and *doxa* create a ‘class sense’, whereby we categorise each other subconsciously based on what we see and hear of them. Moreover, we do not consider practices to be ‘different but equal’, rather we are able to distinguish – and some are considered ‘common’ and ‘vulgar’. Bourdieu argues that it is human nature to do this – to carve up differences between groups and name them and associate them. Then, we fight for what represents us, our identity, against others.

Fields

“Bourdieu argued that in order to understand interactions between people, or to explain an event or social phenomenon, it was insufficient to look at what was said, or what happened. It was necessary to examine the social space in which interactions, transactions and events occurred.” (Thomson 2014: 65)

Bourdieu argued that distinctions in social classes happen in ‘fields’. These are social spaces both physical and metaphorical. For example, schools, television, literature, science and housing are all examples of fields (Thomson 2014). The dominant class are able to decide what is the most legitimate in each field. For example, art in galleries has been determined as the most legitimate form of art by the dominant class.

Despite this, conflict over spaces is rare, as the habitus acts as a ‘regulating device’. People tend to stay *in* spaces where they feel comfortable and avoid those that they do not feel comfortable in – their habitus allows them to feel at home in a space (Devine, Savage, Scott & Crompton 2005).

Within social fields there is a ‘game’ that is constantly being played, whereby individuals are trying to utilise their capital in order to make gains in terms of status and within the hierarchy (McKenzie 2016).

Summary: what is a Bourdieuan class?

Importantly, Bourdieu’s theory shows class as a lived experience, not as an economic position in the Marxist sense, but as an identity (McKenzie 2016). ‘Real classes’, according to Bourdieu, must be formed and mobilised as a group, presupposing representation in terms of class characteristics and representative organisations who will represent that class.

Crossley (2014) argues that there is a tendency for theorists to see the presence of inequality as enough of a basis to argue that a social class exists, due to a distinction in economic capital. However, he argues that a class only becomes a real class when members of high-ranking professions reproduce their advantage across time and generations, narrowing access for children from ‘lesser’-backgrounds. Weininger (2003: 66) adds to the discussion of Bourdieu by focusing on what makes a class a class, rather than just a fraction of another class: “[...] classes are composed of occupational positions whose “inhabitants” tend to exhibit a similar volume of capital holdings: class fractions, in turn, are composed of positions which are differentiated from others within the same class by virtue of the particular capital which occupants tend to hold.”

Unlike Marx, Bourdieu did not argue that this difference would lead to an inevitable class-conflict (Costa and Murphy 2015). This is because people can end up being constrained by their habitus. Therefore, people can become accepting of their place in the hierarchy, and the habitus can stop them from pursuing positions that are not the norm within their class.

When defining class, Bourdieu argues they should be recognised in terms of groups who hold a similar value of capital. Class fractions emerge when they have different types of capital, but this does not mean that they are a separate class. And, this is a major criticism that this thesis aims to take up with Savage's (2015) Bourdieu-inspired structure. The precariat should be viewed as a fraction of the working-class, perhaps, but not as an entirely separate class. By creating an idea of the precariat as a separate class, proponents of the theory are helping to demonise those people placed there, by placing them *lower* than the traditional working-class.

By using Bourdieu's idea of capitals, Savage (2015) was able to pinpoint levels of status and follow patterns in order to come up with his structure – as Bourdieu did himself in *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984). However, Savage did not give enough attention to other aspects of Bourdieu's class theories. For example, within fields, Bourdieu conceptualises the creation of status and class distinction as a 'game', where a competitive process, based on the accumulation of capitals. The habitus means that people see the capital and practices of others within fields as distasteful (Atkinson 2015). Therefore, the concepts of habitus, fields and capital all work in tandem – so, using only capital to generate a Bourdieuan class schema is not doing Bourdieu justice.

Bourdieu's argument is also somewhat based on his views on human nature. Bourdieu argues that humans desire recognition from others, therefore they compete for status based on capital accumulation (Atkinson 2015). It is also human nature to divide people into categories and groups, meaning that we have an automatic class sense. This desire should be reflected on more-so, by theorists like Savage (2015) and Standing (2011), and all proponents of the existence of a precariat class, when writing them into existence despite them being a part of non-academic discourse. To Bourdieu, a class cannot be deemed as such if it does not have a real-life recognition. Otherwise, it is just a 'class on paper' (Crossley 2014). A class must mobilise and act collectively if it is to be deemed a class. There was evidence of this with the precariat presented by Standing (2011) and Foti (2017), using evidence from the 2000s, but this was short-lived. Moreover, Savage's (2015) use of the precariat can be criticised on this basis, as the term has not gained popular prominence, or usage, by the people he uses it to describe, despite widespread media attention.

2.7 Studies on the 'precariat'

There have been numerous academic studies conducted on the concept of the "precariat," and most of these studies do not seek to challenge the class-status associated with the theory. Instead, they tend to take the term as it is presented, assuming its validity and exploring its various dimensions. These studies focus on the lived experiences and the social and economic implications for individuals within this group, often examining how the concept plays out in different labor markets and socio-political contexts. Despite the various angles of inquiry, one common theme in these studies is the persistent and widespread notion of the precariat as a distinct class, even though the term itself remains a subject of debate among some scholars.

For example, Gall (2020) conducted a study examining efforts to unionise members of the precariat, aiming to understand whether traditional forms of labour organisation, such as unions, would be effective for this group. Gall's study revealed several challenges in organising the precariat within existing union structures. He found that unions either tended to be too broad in their scope or too narrowly focused, neither of which resonated with the needs of precariat workers. Furthermore, Gall argues that unions have largely failed to prioritise the unique concerns of the precariat, continuing instead to focus on traditional labour forces and sectors.

This critique aligns with Foti's (2017) argument that the old 'red' politics, which were effective during the industrial era, are increasingly irrelevant in a world where flexible and short-term employment is the norm. For Foti (2017), the precariat's lack of stable, long-term work renders traditional union strategies and the politics associated with them increasingly ineffective.

In a similar vein, Franco (2019) investigated the organisation of fast-food workers in the United States. Franco's study highlights that large-scale, traditional unions, which were once highly effective in organising industrial workers, are not as suitable for the precariat. According to Franco, efforts to organise these workers need to be more localised and context-specific. This localised approach may be promising in some ways, but it also raises questions

about its effectiveness. If the precariat, as Standing (2011) argues, is characterised by a sense of demoralisation and alienation within the workplace, it seems unlikely that small, localised worker organisations would flourish or gain widespread traction. Standing's argument suggests that many within the precariat may not feel invested in or attached to their workplaces, making collective action more difficult to sustain.

Shifting to a different context, Popan (2021) explored the work lives of fast-food delivery drivers in major UK cities such as London and Manchester. Popan's research provides some support for Standing's argument that members of the precariat are often less resilient in difficult times, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic or in the face of adverse weather conditions. In such instances, workers in the precariat are particularly vulnerable due to their lack of resources and job security. However, Popan also acknowledges the sense of collectivism that emerged among these workers during the pandemic, as many were able to achieve some level of organisation and mutual support in the face of these challenges. This insight provides a glimmer of hope for solidarity within the precariat, even in challenging circumstances. Popan's study also highlights the role of social media in facilitating communication and organisation among workers. This aligns with Foti's (2017) view that the internet has become the new 'factory floor', a space where workers can come together and build solidarity, leveraging digital platforms to overcome geographic and social divisions. Nevertheless, Popan's study adds an interesting counter to Foti's analysis, as many of the workers in his study did not fit the profile of the over-educated, middle-class youth that Foti (2017) had identified as the potential vanguard of such movements.

Milkman (2018) conducted a quantitative study that directly challenges some of the assumptions made by Standing (2011; 2014) and Foti (2017) about the demographic characteristics of the precariat. Specifically, Milkman (2018: 50) presents evidence that the 65+ age group in the United States is the fastest-growing segment within the precariat. Despite this growing trend, Milkman points out that there is still a lack of research into how older workers experience precarious employment, both in terms of their economic situation and their personal satisfaction. Milkman argues that this gap in research should be a high priority for future studies. This opens up important questions about how the precariat is not just a young or over-educated cohort, but one that spans various age groups, including older workers who may face their own distinct challenges in the current labour market.

Pajnik (2016) provides an interesting theoretical contribution by applying Bauman's concept of "wasted humans" to the precariat, particularly focusing on migrant workers who, according to Pajnik, are subjected to extreme forms of exploitation. Pajnik argues that migrant members of the precariat experience a form of "wasted" existence that differs significantly from that of non-migrant members of the group. This distinction suggests that the experiences of migrant workers should be studied separately from those of non-migrant precariat members. Pajnik's proposal raises intriguing possibilities for refining the definition of the precariat and understanding the nuanced experiences of different subgroups within this class. However, *this* thesis includes both migrant and non-migrant workers in its analysis, highlighting the need for further exploration of how the experiences of these two groups intersect and diverge.

Van Oort (2015) conducted a comparative study of two different services in the United States that offer job-seeking assistance. One service targeted middle-class individuals, while the other was aimed at the precariat. Van Oort's analysis revealed a stark contrast between the two services. The service for the precariat, in particular, was focused on "punitive management of the poor", treating unemployment as an individual problem rather than a structural one. This approach reflects the neoliberal 'workfarism' culture, which frames poverty and unemployment as personal failures rather than societal issues. This insight ties into broader critiques of neoliberal policies that place the burden of economic hardship on individuals, rather than addressing systemic inequalities.

Perhaps the most relevant and comprehensive research into the precariat to date comes from Manolchev, Saundry, and Lewis (2021), who conducted 77 semi-structured interviews with workers spanning the full spectrum of the precariat. Their study provides compelling evidence that the precariat is beginning to adopt a more collectivist outlook, with participants expressing growing solidarity despite the challenges they face. However, the authors note that they were unable to identify a fully "homogenized" collective within the precariat, as workers had diverse experiences and backgrounds. In fact, the researchers conclude that the concept of the precariat as a "class-in-the-making" is problematic, as the workers they interviewed did not exhibit clear, shared boundaries or uniformed experiences. This suggests that, while there may be commonalities in the precariat's struggles, the group cannot be easily defined or unified into a singular class identity.

These various studies underscore the complexity of the precariat as a social category. While there is evidence of growing solidarity and collective action, it is clear that the precariat remains a diverse and fragmented group. Therefore, and to conclude, the empirical research does not add justification for the use of the term ‘class’ to describe this sociological grouping. It does, however, display one of the major issues this thesis takes with the theory, as the empirical research that discusses the ‘precariat’ does not have a consensus view on *who* actually belongs in the group.

2.8 Alternatives to the precariat

Cox (1981) was a theorist who noticed an early fragmentation in the industrial working class, due to neoliberalism and globalisation. Cox divided the industrial working-class into two separate categories:

1. Established workers: Those with skilled jobs, stability and security, prospects of career progression, and effective trade unions
2. Non-established worker: Those with jobs described as ‘unskilled’, insecure contracts, no career progression prospects, and without effective trade unions

Cox’s work did not go as far as describing a *new* class, but is indicative of the findings and observations that, over the following few decades, led Standing (2011) to defining his ‘precariat’. And, Standing is not alone in this pursuit. Long before neoliberalism, since the early beginnings of sociological thought, class-theorists have been debating the creation of *new* classes and reclassifying distinctions.

Berlant’s (2011) *Cruel Optimism* states that there is a ‘broad agreement’ that precarity has affected class structures both globally and nationally. However, as has been displayed already just on debates about *who* forms the precariat: “[...] descriptions of the affected populations veer wildly from workers in regimes of immaterial labor and the historical working

class to the global managerial class; neobohemians who go to university, live off part-time or temporary jobs; and sometimes the dole while making art; and, well, everyone whose bodies and lives are saturated by capitalist forces and rhythms.” (ibid.: 192). This final section of the literature review presents some prominent alternatives to Standing’s ‘precariat’.

2.8.1 The multitude

“[...] all workers hover precariously between employment and unemployment.” (Hardt & Negri 2004: 131)

The Multitude, as a theory of class, was presented by post-Marxists Hardt & Negri in *Multitude*, originally published in 2004 – seven years prior to Standing’s (2011) *Precariat*.

The authors begin their definition of the multitude, as a class, by describing what it is *not*, as they argue that not recognising such differences could cause confusion. These are as follows:

- The people: The people, or the population, is made up of many different individual identities and classes. The term, ‘the people’, forces a fusion into one singular identity and diminishes the importance of the individuals who make up the mass.
- The crowd: The crowd (or the mob, or the rabble) holds some social power, with the potential to be destructive. However, they do not act on their own accord and are open to manipulation.

In contrast, the term, the ‘multitude’, allows a recognition of plurality. Unlike the ‘people’ or the ‘crowd’, who can become ‘fragmented, anarchical, or incoherent’, the multitude is able to stand in solidarity, as one organism, united by what they have in common – not divided by their differences.

Hardt and Negri's (ibid.: 100) work is an attempt to challenge a 'truth' of political philosophy:

"[...] one of the recurring truths of political philosophy is that only the one can rule, be it the monarch, the party, the people, or the individual; social subjects that are not unified and remain multiple cannot rule and instead must be ruled. Every sovereign power, in other words, necessarily forms a *political body* of which there is a head that commands, limbs that obey, and organs that function to support the ruler. The concept of the multitude challenges this accepted truth of sovereignty. The multitude, although it remains multiple and internally different, is able to act in common and thus rule itself. Rather than a political body with one that commands and others that obey, the multitude is *living flesh* that rules itself."

The multitude, here, is attempting to bridge the gap in class theory between unity, most often associated with Marxist theories of the proletariat, and plurality, more associated with liberal theories of class. This is a post-Marxist recognition of how capital's rule has extended far beyond factory walls in the era of neoliberalism. As the author's (ibid.: 102) describe it: "[...] capitalist command tends to become a "non-place" or, really, an every place." What's more, they recognise that neoliberalism has seen industrial labour become much-less prominent and being replaced with immaterial labour.

The multitude theory, much like some theories of the precariat, is a reaction to the precarity of life in general. Not just in the workplace, but the precarity of everything from national identity to family identity. Therefore, it offers a criticism of the colloquially accepted term 'working class':

"The exclusions of other forms of labor from the working class are based on the notion that there are differences of kind between, for example, male industrial and female reproductive labor, between industrial labor and peasant labor, between the employed and the unemployed, between workers and the poor." (ibid.: 106)

This new(er) term, then, is an attempt to redefine the proletariat with a fuller definition, as the class not of workers but of all who live under the rule of capital. This is exciting for the authors, as they claim that this basis is a powerful one for potential political uprising – they urge the reader not to ask what the multitude is but ask what it may become. Proponents of the precariat theory may propose that it has *become* the precariat.

The multitudes inclusivity may be its biggest weakness, as it fails to recognise that the massive difference in lifestyles between the two ends of the spectrum would make it impossible for the commonality of the multitude ever to create affective political movements – much in the same way that many have criticised Standing’s (2011) precariat. However, unlike many precariat theorists, Hardt and Negri have at least extended their inclusion to those at the very *bottom* of the social order. They recognise that other terms, such as the ‘*lumpenproletariat*’ and the ‘underclass’ demonise the poor, which has led to some communist and socialists disregarding the role of the poor in political organisation. So, that is one of the multitudes greatest strengths, in recognising the political importance of the poor: “It has never been true, of course, that the poor and the unemployed do nothing. The strategies of survival themselves often require extraordinary resourcefulness and creativity.” (ibid.: 131)

2.8.2 The *lumpenproletariat*

“The fundamental structural characteristic of the *lumpenproletariat*, properly speaking, is its nonrelation to production – its existence as a nonworking class.” (Barrow 2020: 137)

In the first English-Language version of *The Communist Manifesto*, the *lumpenproletariat* was described as “the dangerous class” and “the social scum”, due to their being no direct translation for the term – which gives some an idea of what Marx and Engels thought about this sub-group (*cited in* Barrow 2020). Marx and Engels argued that the *lumpenproletariat*’s

involvement in the class struggle was as pawns for the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie could easily manipulate the proletariat and treat them as a counterweight to the demands of the proletariat.

Palmer (2013) challenges the above accepted description of how Marx and Engels perceived the *lumpenproletariat*, making the following four arguments/points:

1. The prefix of '*lumpen*' is meant to show a debasement from the proletariat but not a complete detachment or a completely separate class: "[...] the term is far less a rigorous classification of analytic substance than it is an adjective of vitriol." (ibid.: 52).
2. The proletariat, as Marx described it, should not be conceptualised as a group or a class, but rather: "[...] individuals *directed* in this way by bourgeois forces." (ibid. 53)
3. The *lumpenproletariat* and the proletariat are part of a continuum of the same class.
4. The *lumpenproletariat* were/are as such as a result of capitalism's readiness to criminalise poverty.

However, despite Palmer's defence, debates about the *lumpenproletariat* have been common. For example, While Marx saw the *lumpenproletariat*'s role in the class struggle as pawns of the bourgeoisie, Mikhail Bakunin (*cited in Barrow 2020*) and Max Stirner (1913) were of the opposite opinion, arguing that the poverty of the *lumpenproletariat* made them *even more revolutionary* than the proletariat. Stirner preferred the term the 'unique proletariat', arguing that they were the most dangerous class *to* capitalism.

Throughout Marx-inspired communist states in the 20th century, there was always a debate as to what should be *done* with the *lumpenproletariat*. Rosa Luxemburg argued that instead of allowing the *lumpenproletariat* to be bribed by the bourgeoisie, as Marx warned, they should be bribed by socialists with massive expansion of the welfare state (Barrow 2020). Lenin and Mao were both fascinated by the *lumpenproletariat* and had thought to recruit the *lumpenproletariat* into the military, but were cautious in their approaches, fearing the anarchical nature of the *lumpenproletariat* (Barrow 2020).

Korte and Tan Chen (2021) offer some literature where the precariat is discussed with the *lumpenproletariat* and argue that precarity it is a symptom of work that has existed far before the modern onset of neoliberalism, to the beginnings of capitalism. They argue that the precariat is better recognised as a part of a surplus population of labour – in particular, the *stagnant* population, highly disposable workers with irregular employment. Below is Marx’s (1977: 602) description of the ‘stagnant’:

“The third category of the relative surplus population, the stagnant, forms a part of the active labour army, but with extremely irregular employment. Hence it furnishes to capital an inexhaustible reservoir of disposable labour-power. Its conditions of life sink below that of the average normal level of the working class; this makes it at once the broad basis of special branches of capitalist exploitation. It is characterised by a maximum of working time, and a minimum of wages [...].”

2.8.3 The ‘underclass’

“[...] the ‘underclass’ doesn’t refer to degree of poverty, but to a type of poverty.”
(Murray 1990: 24)

Welshman’s (2006) *The Underclass* presents the fullest ‘history of the excluded’. Starting in the 1880s and finishing in 2000, Welshman meticulously overviews and discusses theories of the *lowest* class. Firstly, Welshman discusses the ‘residuum’ who existed *below* the ‘respectable working class’. The ‘residuum’, much like Marx’s *lumpenproletariat*, were seen to be lacking in principle, and so were used as an argument against full suffrage, as they’d only sell their votes to the highest bidder. Next, Welshman discusses the ‘social problem era’, where proponents of the bogus scientific concept of eugenics were attempting to use science to identify members of this so-called ‘social problem’ – which “[...]. Provided middle-class professional groups with a single-cause explanation of social problems.” (ibid.: 64).

For decades, professionals in both biological and social sciences attempted to prove the existence of a ‘social problem’ group, with, of course, no success. Welshman argues that in the 1950s and 1960s, attention turned to ‘problem families’ instead, laying the foundations for Keith Joseph to discuss the ‘cycle of deprivation’ in the 1970s. By the 1980s, the cycle of deprivation was considered by many to be a legitimate theory. This was despite Joseph funding over £1 million on research which produced 37 studies and 20 books which completely disproved his theory. In fact, the consensus viewpoint was that *despite* the poverty faced-by-many, they remained remarkably in-line with British values (Rutter & Madge 1996 *cited in* Walker 1996). However, at this point, the term ‘underclass’ became a popular part of discourse in discussions of poverty.

Welshman (2006; *see also* Westergaard 1992) concludes by outlining four basic positions that theorists have, in relation to the underclass:

- A ‘moral turpitude’ position: This is an individualist argument which blames the creation of an underclass on the deviance and bad behaviour of individuals. This is perhaps the most prominent position. (*see also* Murray 1990; Murray 1996; Murray 1999)
- A structural position: This position has been adopted by some on the Left, who agree that an underclass has been created but do not blame individual faults. (*see also* Field 1996; Phillips 1996)
- The agnostic view: The theoretical possibility of an underclass is acceptable, but there is a lack of empirical evidence of one such class existing.
- A rejection of the underclass: The concept of an underclass should be outright rejected, as it is politically dangerous and has no grounding in empirical evidence. (*see also* Baldwin, Coles & Mitchell 1997)

One of the earliest theorists of an ‘underclass’ was Myrdal (1962), who recognised that a subsection of the US population was being ‘left behind’ by capitalist technological progression.

Giddens (1979) was another early proponent of an ‘underclasses’ existence but concluded that the ‘underclass’ was no more than a subsection of the working-class.

However, the most prominent proponent of the theory of an ‘underclass’ is undoubtedly Charles Murray, who began writing on an ‘underclass’ in the USA in the 1980s, before being invited to Britain at the end of the decade to explore the possibility that an ‘underclass’ was emerging in Britain also. Murray took inspiration from Auletta (1982) who argued that the cause of an American underclass was deficiencies in characters and morals of individuals.

Murray (1999) provides the following three ‘indicators of the underclass’:

- **Criminality:** “The habitual criminal is the classic member of the underclass, living by preying on his fellow citizens. High crime rates also create a milieu, demoralizing the law-abiding elements of the community and establishing a predatory ethic that spreads beyond criminals.” (ibid.: 2)
- **Dropout from the labor force among young males:** “One basic element of the social contract is that healthy young men go to work. The economic and social institutions of mainstream society depend on it.” (ibid.: 2)
- **Illegitimacy:** “When a large proportion of the children in a given community grows up without fathers, the next generation, especially the young males in the next generation, tends to grow up unsocialized – unready to take on the responsibilities of work and family, often criminal, often violent. The effects of absent fathers are compounded by the correlations of illegitimacy with intellectual, emotional, and financial deficits among young mothers – deficits that in turn show correlations with bad parenting practices.” (ibid.: 2-3)

Murray proposes that the ‘problem of the underclass’ be solved by a ‘scorched earth’ approach to the welfare state – removing all possibility of financial security from single-mothers, so that men would be forced to get gainful employment if they are to win the affection of a woman and start a family.

Murray's work has, unsurprisingly, been heavily criticised – after all, he was, amongst other things, advocating for depriving the children of single-mothers resources and food as a way to deter younger women from doing the same thing. The major criticism is that he places the blame on individuals, rather than on structural factors, such as deindustrialisation and the rollback of the welfare state.

Former Labour MP Frank Field (1996) was another proponent of the underclass theory, and his view offers a criticism of Murray's conception. He was of the position that the underclass exists as a result of structural factors. Field divided the underclass into the following three groups:

- The very frail and elderly: This sub-group of the underclass would not form part of Murray's 'underclass', as he would agree that they are in their position for structural reasons, rather than because of 'bad behaviour'
- The single parent on welfare: Field argues that the welfare system creates a poverty-trap, so single parents are stuck in the underclass
- The long-term unemployed: Unlike Murray, Field places the blame for this on deindustrialisation decimating the amounts of jobs.

Melania Phillips (1996: 158) shares a similar position to Field, and opens her critique with the following statement:

“Charles Murray is like a bit of chewing gum that gets stuck to the sole of your shoe. You scrape it off in disgust, but your shoe still sticks to the pavement as you walk. When you remove the shoe and peel off the remainder of the offending gum, you find the sole comes away in your hands. It was rotten anyway. It was all too vulnerable to attack.”

At first glance, this statement reads like a vitriolic put-down of Murray's work. However, like Field she believes the existence of an 'underclass' to be a very real phenomenon. She was at

odds with Murray over two key points. Firstly, she disagreed with Murray, who argued that people had become dependent on the overly generous welfare state, and this played a role in the creation of this ‘underclass’. Secondly, she disagreed with Murray’s approach for ‘solving’ the ‘underclass problem’ – the complete removal of welfare incentives for single mothers.

Perhaps the second-most prominent proponent of an ‘underclass’ theory, after Murray, was William Julius Wilson (2012). Wilson studied the Black ‘underclass’ in the United States and disputed other theorists who put emphasis on cultural and racial divisions being the *causing* the emergence of a ‘Black underclass’ – Wilson, instead, maintained that it was an issue of history, including structural racism, slavery and the migration of former slaves to low paid and low skilled jobs in the industrial northern cities and manufacturing base of the USA, and, therefore, class, citing how many Black people were upwardly socially mobile towards the end of the 20th century. Moreover, Wilson did not seek to diminish the extent of social and economic problems and inequalities in US urban ghettos (and received much criticism for this from the ‘liberal left’) but situated these within the economic decline of these post-industrial places and the class structure within this. However, Wilson subsequently abandoned the term of the ‘underclass’ given it became so intertwined with right-wing cultural theorists, like Murray, and lost its utility as a result.

Another criticism is based around the language of the ‘underclass’. It is immediately a derogatory term, with the connotations of ‘under’ being *beneath* the rest of society and lacking in worthiness. It makes it easy for the rest of society to take no responsibility for the welfare of the less-privileged (Lister 1996). This is supported by Bauman (1998), who argues that such language makes the poorest in society seem undeserving.

Miriam David (1996) provides a different angle of criticism, claiming that Murray, as an American, lacked the requisite knowledge and appreciation of the British class system to be able to make the statements that he made. Moreover, she points out that if illegitimate births are *really* causing an ‘underclass’ to emerge, then they will become the “over- or majority-class” in the not-too-distant future, with one-third of children being born illegitimately at the time she was writing.

Other criticisms of the underclass theory are similar to those imposed on theories of a precariat. For example, this quote from Bauman (1998: 66), challenging the legitimacy of the existence of an ‘underclass’, could just as easily be aimed at theories of a precariat:

“What can make putting them all together look sensible? What do single mothers have in common with alcoholics, or illegal immigrants with school dropouts?” (Bauman 1998: 66)

Also, MacDonald (1997: 189) states that:

“Unemployment, job insecurity and underemployment have become common *working-class* experiences, rather than the preserve of an underclass separated from and beneath them.” (189)

One could remove the word ‘underclass’ and put ‘precariat’ in place, and these criticisms would work just as effectively. Another issue discussed in this chapter is that ‘the precariat’ means so many different things to different theorists, that it ceases to lose affective meaning. Macnicol’s (1994: 30) following criticism of the ‘underclass’ theory would be equally as relevant for criticising ‘the precariat’: “[...] there are as many definitions of the underclass as there are sociologists.”

In 1996, Murray wrote his ‘Rejoinder’ in response to his many critics, making the following five points:

- He claimed he was not ‘victim-blaming’, as he recognises that government policies have *allowed* the underclass to become reliant on the overly generous welfare state.
- Blame is irrelevant, regardless of who is to blame the outcome remains the same.

- Individual responsibility must be encouraged: “[...] even if it is true that a poor young person is not responsible for the condition in which he finds himself, the worse thing one can do is try to persuade him of that.” (ibid.: 85)
- If people are not blamed for ‘bad behaviour’ then it becomes impossible to praise others for ‘good behaviour’
- Murray argues he would hold the same moral standards for his family, citing how he would judge the morals of his daughter if she brought home an illegitimate child.

A further criticism of Murray’s work is that he was funded and published by the Institute of Economic Affairs, Britain’s most funded and largest neoliberal think-tank. His writings were not based in empirical research; therefore, his theory can be deemed to be a political one. Depictions and discussions of an ‘underclass’ were more popular in the late 20th century than now, and its place in the British political and sociological lexicon has shrunk considerably. However, it remains significant in terms of its contribution to longstanding debates around those who are deemed dependent on, or not contributing towards, the welfare state and the moralisation around these.

2.8.4 The working class

This final alternative represents a central contention of this thesis, forming its ultimate argument against the adoption of the term ‘precariat’ – or any of the alternatives that have been discussed earlier in the text. Rather than attempting to introduce or redefine class categories by rebranding or renaming them, this thesis makes the case that discussions of precarity and its implications on the British class structure should not aim to reshape or complicate the existing class terminology. Instead, it asserts that the focus should be placed on embracing the most widely accepted and colloquially resonant terminology, a term that still holds significant meaning and relevance for the majority of people today—namely, the: ‘working class’.

The decision to use the term ‘working class’ over more recent labels, like ‘precariat’, is not merely a matter of preference, but rather one that considers the continuity of language and

the lived experiences of the people it describes. The term ‘working class’ still evokes a sense of identity and solidarity for a significant portion of the population. It resonates with people who identify with a long-standing tradition of manual and low-wage work and with communities whose social and economic circumstances have remained relatively stable over generations. The argument here is that the shift away from this term towards a more abstract label, such as the ‘precariat’, risks alienating and excluding people who still identify with the working-class ethos and values.

Byrne (1995) provides a valuable example of how such changes in class discussion can be addressed while maintaining respect for the traditional and more widely accepted language surrounding class. Byrne refers to what Standing (2011), and Savage (2015), would later call the ‘precariat’ by using the term ‘dispossessed working class’. This is a notable distinction, as it allows for a conversation about the precarious conditions of the modern workforce without dismissing or undermining the historical significance and identity of the working-class. Byrne argues that this description is not only accurate, but it also appropriately centres the experiences of individuals by focusing on what has been done to them, rather than what they may have done to bring about their situation. As Byrne (ibid.: 96) states, “The emphasis is on what has been done to people, not what they may have done themselves.” This critical shift in focus allows for a more empathetic and humanising portrayal of the working-class experience, which is often characterised by forces beyond the control of those affected.

Importantly, people within Byrne’s ‘dispossessed working class’ are not portrayed as ‘dangerous’ or ‘deviant’, which is a common stereotype associated with the more negative interpretations of the working-class in popular discourse. In contrast, Byrne emphasises that these individuals are still deserving of respect and dignity. They continue to be recognised as part of the working class, as their families have likely occupied this class position for generations, despite the transformations in work and employment patterns that have occurred over time. By maintaining the use of the term ‘working class’, Byrne acknowledges the historical continuity of class identity while also recognising the contemporary challenges that have emerged in the wake of economic and social changes.

Further, Byrne (1999: 1) deepens this understanding in his work *Social Exclusion*. Here, the language surrounding exclusion becomes even more significant, as Byrne argues that

“‘Exclusion’ is something that is done by some people to other people.” In his view, the term ‘exclusion’ conveys the social forces that marginalize people from the broader socio-economic fabric, making clear that the processes of exclusion are not inherent to individuals themselves, but rather are imposed by external forces. Although Byrne recognizes that insecurity is a pervasive and ‘inherent’ feature of the neoliberal flexible labour market, he rejects the idea of categorising this group of individuals under a new label or defining them as a separate class. He continues to use the term ‘working class’.

Byrne’s refusal to create a new class category reflects a broader understanding of class dynamics that does not rely on the constant reinvention of language or the creation of new terms. Instead, he places value in the established and familiar language of class, seeing it as both a more accessible and respectful way to engage with the lived experiences of working-class individuals. His focus on ‘working class’ terminology recognises the enduring significance of this category, even as it evolves to accommodate the new realities of modern labor markets and the experiences of workers who find themselves in precarious positions.

In chapters 6 and 7 of this thesis, the argument for prioritising the colloquially accepted and most common terminology of ‘working class’ will be further developed. This thesis will continue to argue that the use of alternative labels such as ‘precariat’ – while potentially useful in academic discussions or in understanding certain socio-economic trends – fails to capture the broader, more deeply entrenched sense of identity that is still strongly associated with the term ‘working class’. By embracing this familiar terminology, we ensure that the conversation around class identity remains rooted in the lived experiences of real people, whose voices are often marginalised in the discussions of more abstract, academic classifications. Thus, the thesis will further advocate for the continued use and importance of the term ‘working class’ as an enduring symbol of solidarity, struggle, and shared experience in the face of ongoing social and economic challenges.

2.9 Summary and conclusion

From the mid-20th century onwards, precarity, precariousness and precarization have been discussed as key conditions and features of life – with the precariat first being discussed as a sociological grouping in the 1980s. This chapter has provided a brief overview of how neoliberalism in Britain accelerated deindustrialisation and, in turn, intensified feelings of precarity.

In the early 2000s, the precariat became a political identity during the global justice movement. Activists like Alex Foti and groups such as the Chainworkers and EuroMayDay protests helped shape the concept, using symbols like “San Precario” and issuing manifestos calling for rights and solidarity. This early 2000s version of the precariat often focused on educated, middle-class youth and promoted cross-class alliances. Over time, however, the term has come to have different meanings, with some, like Standing (2011) using the term to describe a global class, while others, like Savage (2015) using it to describe the most downtrodden people in Britain. This shift, and lack of clarity over who the precariat includes, has made the term increasingly contested.

Savage’s (2015) use of the term to describe a class gained much media attention. Savage moved away from purely an economic understanding of class to describe the precariat utilising Bourdieu, to focus on social capital and cultural capital, as well as economic capital. However, as has been displayed in this chapter, the precariat is not unique within academic sociology, and exists alongside a long list of alternative theories.

To conclude, this thesis develops the following critique and observations stemming from the literature review:

1. Classes are not fluid, even in an era of neoliberalism and globalisation. While prominent proponents of the existence of a new ‘precariat’ class frequently frame class as increasingly flexible, individualised, or eroded by meritocracy and mobility, strong and enduring national class structures and identities remain prominent. Rather than dissolving class boundaries, neoliberalism has reconfigured them. This reconfiguration

has occurred through the expansion of precarious labour markets, the weakening of collective institutions such as trade unions, and the shifting of economic risk from the state and employers onto individuals. Class remains a structural and collective condition.

2. Precarity is not a *new* or neoliberal feature of the working-class, both in Britain and globally. Standing (2011), Savage (2015), and other proponents of the classes existence, have understated the prevalence of precarity as a feature of working-class life, long before neoliberalism.
3. There is no academic consensus on who/what the precariat are/is. The disparity in how different academics utilise the term, which undermines its application and utility.
4. Savage's (2015) utilisation of the 'precariat' is superior to Standing's (2011; 2014) and Foti's (2017), due to its reliance on empirical research. However, it could have been improved with a fuller application of Bourdieu's theoretical frameworks, instead of using 'capitals' in isolation. However, Savage provides the fullest definition of the precariat, which is useful for developing a sample for primary research.
5. The precariat exists as a relevant sociological grouping, but not as a class.
6. The language of 'dangerous' and 'angry', as a way of describing the precariat, is unhelpful and not grounded in empirical knowledge.
7. The precariat does not exist in isolation and many of the criticisms aimed at alternatives, such as the 'multitude', the '*lumpenproletariat*', and the 'underclass' could equally be used to criticise the 'precariat'.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research problem

The lack of research which focuses on the precariat, specifically using the term, is problematic – as the term’s usage becomes more commonplace, accepted and unchallenged. Despite the theoretical discussions, debates, and many theorists who dismissed the theory following the success of *The Precariat* (Standing 2011), there are many others who now utilise the terminology without question (*see, for example*, Rys and François 2024). However, there has been very little research which has attempted to sample and interview the precariat, by creating a sample based on the criteria laid out by theorists who have outlined the precariat. Further, there has been no research that captures the thoughts on the use of the terminology from the people who the word ‘precariat’ is used to describe and label.

Defining the population who form the precariat is a difficult task, as the typology of the precariat (Figure 5) provided in this thesis displays. Even the most prominent proponents of the theorised class have very differing ideas of *who* belongs *in* the class. Furthermore, there are no clear and consistent parameters and boundaries of the class in the literature. For the sake of this thesis, Savage’s (2015) definition of the precariat has been used to navigate the sampling process – and this definition will be discussed again, later in this chapter. The reason Savage’s definition has been chosen is because it offers a clearer definition than others and lacks the ambiguity of Standing (2011) and Foti (2017), where middle-class professions are reflected in the precariat.

The research problem is relatively simple: here is an often- discussed, theorised, and debated sociological grouping/class who, despite this, have rarely been the subject of empirical research. This research aims to contribute towards solving that problem, through a thorough exploration of the literature, defining a sample population, choosing an appropriate methodology and providing an in-depth narrative of the chosen case study. It is also a problem that this theory lacks empirical investigation because the people described in discussions of the precariat are the greatest source of knowledge about their own lived experiences. Part of the

rationale behind this research is challenging sociological discussions of class which do not utilise knowledge from within the communities being discussed. This is a problem prevalent in much of the literature on the precariat, including Standing's work (2011; 2014). In Savage's (2015) work, ethnographic research did gain empirical insights into the precariat, but it was in an attempt to legitimise his class structure, following quantitative research. This research, on the other hand, takes a more grounded/inductive approach, with no desire to legitimise Savage's utilisation of the term.

3.2 Research questions

The thesis has three overarching research questions. The first question is mainly informed by the literature, with its differing, complex and often-contradictory definitions of the precariat. Moreover, this thesis adds to the complexity in understanding *who* is part of the precariat. The next two research questions form the basic guidance for the empirical research undertaken.

1. What is the precariat, and who belongs in it?

As demonstrated in chapter 2, the theories of the precariat are vast and differ considerably. This thesis has already provided an in-depth summary of the many theories of the precariat, displaying how some proponents name it as a 'class' and others completely dismiss the term's sociological relevance. This dissertation has taken the third view – that the precariat is not a class and should not be deemed as one, while accepting that it is a relevant sociological grouping. This view aligns with that of Lisa McKenzie, who was a researcher on Savage's (2015) *Social Class in the 21st Century*, by providing empirical knowledge of the precariat. On an episode of *Thinking Allowed* (2015), in discussion with Guy Standing, McKenzie praises the term but argues that the precariat is merely a fraction of the working-class. Despite McKenzie's empirical understandings of the precariat being vital in Savage's narrative, this view of the precariat as a fraction of the working-class is not recognised, by Savage, in *Social*

Class in the 21st Century, displaying a conflict within the sociological community attempting to define this group. To aid answering this research question, this thesis provides a typology of the precariat (Figure 5), which aids academic understandings of the different conceptualisations of the precariat as a class. Moreover, the literature review chapters of this thesis describe the historical context for the emergence of the precariat (e.g., neoliberalism; Thatcherism; New Labour), as well as arguments about the insufficiency of this context. Moreover, this research places the precariat within historical trends in sociological understandings of class. While recognising the link between the precariat and Marxism, this dissertation also describes the advancement in class-theory popularised by Bourdieu, in recognising class as a matter of factors beyond economic capital.

Furthermore, the findings of the research in this thesis present a critique of *all* major proponents of the precariat theory covered in the literature review. It does this by displaying that, while those prominent theories focused solely, or heavily, on economic understandings of class, they failed to recognise the more complex reasonings that many people find themselves in positions of poverty and precarity.

2. Given the emphasis placed on the ‘danger’ of the precariat, what are the politics of the precariat?

The precariat, as was demonstrated throughout the theoretical literature review, have been the source of political debate. Standing (2011) warns of a ‘dangerous’ class capable of inflicting a ‘politics of inferno’ but also speaks of hope of a ‘politics of paradise’. Foti (2017) praises the progressive and anarchical nature of the precariat. And Savage (2015), despite his differing definition, employs Standing’s language of ‘dangerous’, describing a ‘frustrated’ and ‘angry’ class. Therefore, the semi-structured interview guide (Appendix D), which will be described in more detail later in this chapter, incorporates questions and prompts related to politics.

This understanding of the politics of the precariat is an important contribution, given that this grouping is much theorised but empirically underdeveloped, in sociological research.

3. What can be learned from the lived experience of the precariat?

This informs another important contribution of this thesis, which provides an understanding of people in positions of poverty and precarity, and their daily hardships. As this study utilised an extended case method approach, it developed one of the key findings around better understanding the mental health crisis. This thesis is, then, able to contribute an understanding of how mental health services are not meeting the needs of the precariat and discusses where the needs are being met, such as in community centres and homeless shelters, which provide a sense of community and identity.

3.3 Case study

Chapter 4 begins with a biography of place, where a history of Bournemouth and Poole, alongside a discussion of the data collected from this research, provides an overview of the case study locations.

The locations were chosen for two main reasons. Firstly, the towns, have a reputation for sandy beaches that make it easy for outsiders to overlook poverty (an issue facing seaside communities in general, to be discussed in the biography of place in Chapter 4). However, almost a third of children in Bournemouth are living in poverty (End Child Poverty 2023). Misconceptions of these towns as a pretty seaside town – and nothing more – means that the poorest people in Bournemouth are likely to be marginalised from national policy and debate about poverty/discrimination/precariety. Moreover, because Bournemouth and Poole are home to a lot of affluent individuals and areas like Sandbanks (Church 2023), the impoverished individuals and areas are also marginalised within the locality. The fact this group are part of an overlooked community, means the research will provide a unique contribution to the academic knowledge of the precariat.

Secondly, the areas' three Parliamentary constituencies, Bournemouth West, Bournemouth East, and Poole, had previously almost always voted Conservative – and taking

into account boundary changes in these areas there have been very few Liberal/Liberal Democrat MPs and not a single Labour MP. This was until the 2024 General Election, after my primary data collection was completed, when all three seats recorded their first ever Labour MPs. This voting record means that the working-class interests have not been represented through what is considered, by many, their traditional political party. Since 2019, many political commentators have put a strong emphasis on communities who formed part the ‘Red Wall’ of constituencies which turned their backs on the Labour Party in support of Boris Johnson’s Brexit-centric general election campaign (*see, for example*, Payne 2021). When looking at Bournemouth’s parliamentary constituencies they are clearly not part of that trend, but when looking at elections for local government a different picture emerges. For example, the Kinson ward had only ever elected councillors representing the Labour Party or the Liberal Democrats up to 2019. But, in 2019, voted in three Conservative councillors.

Utilising ‘nested deprivation’

Given this context, I use ‘nested deprivation’ to inform understandings of the case study location. ‘Nested deprivation’ refers to the specific phenomenon of deprivation occurring within otherwise affluent or prosperous areas. As defined by Boswell et al. (2022), nested deprivation can manifest within a small-scale context, such as a single housing estate or even a row of flats, within neighbourhoods that are generally considered affluent or prosperous. This localised form of deprivation highlights that the broader geographical classification of a region – such as affluent or impoverished areas – does not always align with the lived experiences of individuals within those regions.

There are multiple large areas of Bournemouth which could be classed as areas of nested deprivation. West Howe has long had a reputation for being one of the most deprived estates in England – according to Recreate Dorset (formerly the Bournemouth 2026 Trust *via* Daily Echo 2012). Moreover, End Child Poverty has found that some areas of Bournemouth are far above the national 30% average of children living in poverty (End Child Poverty 2022). The average rate of child poverty in Bournemouth is below the national average, at 27.5%.

However, four of its wards have a rate higher than the national average, with Boscombe West having a staggering 43% of its children living in poverty (End Child Poverty 2019).

The notion of nested deprivation challenges the conventional understanding of spatial inequality. The authors note that a quick look at national census data or a brief geographical exploration of Britain makes it clear that the country cannot be divided into areas of economic prosperity and areas of poverty. As they (*ibid.*: 170) put it, “A 20-minute drive from almost any point on the map, or a cursory glance at ONS census data, reveals that the UK cannot be so neatly divided geographically into economic haves and have-nots.” This insight calls attention to the complexities of geographical inequality, where the experience of deprivation is not always limited to regions traditionally associated with poverty.

Nested deprivation is not evenly distributed across the country, with its occurrence more frequent and intense in areas that are generally more prosperous, such as the South of England. The phenomenon also differs from concentrated deprivation in other regions, particularly in its intensity and visibility. As Boswell et al., (*ibid.*: 170) describe, “Inequality, in contexts of nested deprivation, is acute and immediate. For individuals living in nested deprivation, economic, social, and political inequality is in-your-face, not through the television set.” This localised form of deprivation often feels more immediate and present, intensifying the social and political divisions within affluent regions.

Furthermore, individuals affected by nested deprivation are not always recognised as part of the marginalised or left-behind groups in national discourse. Instead of being labelled as the “Left Behind,” those living in nested deprivation are often described as the “Never Acknowledged” (Boswell et al. 2022: 170-1). This reflects the broader issue of invisibility and neglect, where their struggles remain unaddressed in the broader political and social dialogue, overshadowed by the focus on more easily identifiable areas of concentrated deprivation.

The example of counties like Dorset is particularly telling. These areas are often portrayed as emblematic of the “winners” in the socio-political divide caused by rising inequality in Britain. Aggregate statistics suggest the South of England is thriving, with high employment rates and rising house prices. However, these broader statistics mask individual experiences of deprivation within these regions. As Boswell et al. (*ibid.*: 171) argue, “Aggregate statistics present the South of England as an area of high employment, with rising

house prices close to London benefitting the South’s relatively high proportion of homeowners. But aggregate statistics hide individual experience.” This highlights the disconnect between macro-level data and the nuanced realities of those facing deprivation within otherwise prosperous areas.

The precariat (whether defined as a class or not) are already an under-represented group of people. However, one could argue that in places, such as Bournemouth and Poole – in the south and not associated strongly with an industrial history – the precariat (or at least those who Savage would describe as being *in* the precariat) are experiencing nested deprivation that leaves them even less-represented. To summarise, the growth of the precariat is an international phenomenon that manifests in place and should, therefore, include local case studies.

3.3.1 What is a case?

Case

The term ‘case study’ is often-used by sociologists without an interrogation of what the term itself actually means. It is difficult to define. In the introduction to *What is a Case?* (Ragin & Becker 1992), Ragin (1992a: 2, 5) states that “[...] every study is a case study because it is an analysis of social phenomena specific to time and place.” And that, “Boundaries around places and time periods define cases.” By this simple definition, the case study for this research is Bournemouth and Poole (place/boundary) from January 2023, when data collection began, to November 2023, when data collection ended (time). However, there are also cases within the case, in terms of the boundary, with more impoverished wards within Bournemouth and Poole being the focal point of the research.

Becker, co-editing *What is a Case?*, insists that sociologists should keep asking themselves ‘what is this a case of?’ throughout the entirety of their research project (from literature review to write-up), in order to define a case – rather than attempting to define a case beforehand or during the early stages of a research process.

This research builds on Ragin and Becker's work by utilising some elements of an extended case method (*see* Burawoy 1998; 2009). This method allowed me to develop themes organically through the research process. For example, mental health was not a pre-determined theme but became one to such an extent that understanding the mental health of the sample population has become one of the key contributions of this thesis. Therefore, an important part of this research became a case study of mental health precarity. The same can be said for homelessness. This extended case method approach aligns with Becker's (*ibid.*) desire that sociologists should constantly asking 'what is this a case of?' and should not fully understand the answer to that question until the very-final stages of writing-up a study.

However, while the extended case method was utilised in the process of this research, alongside a constant questioning and (re-)determining of the case study, there was a pre-determined case study. As previously mentioned, Bournemouth and Poole provided the *boundary* for the case study and 2023 (broadly) provided the *time*. But, this research takes the view of Walton (1992: 122) that, "Cases come wrapped in theories." Walton argues that cases are "made" on the basis of pre-existing theories – and this is very-much the case in the *raison d'être* of this study and, therefore, the chosen case study. One major element of disapproval and disagreement with proponents of the precariat as a theorised-class that this thesis takes is that it is overly-theorised and under-researched – and this is problematic. This study follows Walton's (1992: 125) idea of case studies in that it aims to 'illuminate' a theory, and "[...] it adds something to substantiate or, preferably, expand earlier understandings." This research provided one of very-few attempts to empirically research the precariat and the only attempt to do so while critically analysing the literature in order to find a suitable population for sampling. This is supported by (Ragin 1992b: 220) who also states the importance of case studies in bridging the gap between theory and data: "[...] once cases have been found, they may be used to refund or even refute the theory that provide the initial guidance."

Consequently, I developed the following definition of a case, to help guide the research:

- A study based in place and time;
- A continual process of (re)definition;
- An extension of smaller cases within the framework on an initial case;
- Shaped by pre-existing theories;
- An attempt to either justify or challenge pre-existing theories.

Space

In Lefebvre's (1991) *The Production of Space*, the author argues that space is a social product that is constantly created and recreated through human activity. Understanding social spaces, he argues, means understanding how society relates to space and time in order to shape the lived experiences of individuals. Moreover, Lefebvre's seminal work goes on to draw from Gramscian-hegemony, arguing that an understanding of space, today, requires an understanding of how capitalism permeates spaces, and how capitalism has become ever-present.

Similarly, Wacquant (2007a) argues that space is more than just a backdrop for social interactions. Space plays a central role in shaping social relations and power dynamics. Wacquant paid particular attention to spaces which were used as tools for the regulation and control of people in poverty, who he termed as 'urban outcasts'.

Bourdieu's conceptualisation of space relates more to how people interact, based on their shared or differing habituses. Moreover, "Social space is connected to physical space through the habitus as a body, which is in a "place" both physically and socially." (Reed-Danahay 2020: 22). Bourdieu argued that coming-into-contact with those outside of an individual's social space could be deemed 'intolerable', which leads people to stay secluded within social spaces. Like, for example, for the participants in this research, community centres and homeless support shelters.

These three understandings of space are important for informing this research. Lefebvre's work allows for a critical recognition of capitalism's role in the creation of spaces. This is useful when utilising an extended case method, as this research does, so that *this* case study can be viewed as a case within a wider case – a national case of precarity. Wacquant

argues for a focus on the physical spaces where the sample population are controlled and regulated. Many of the physical spaces explored in this research, such as foodbanks and homeless shelters, are friendly and caring spaces. However, they are inevitably still sites of regulation, where full-time workers are employed to ensure the running of the centres. And finally, Bourdieu's is an argument for recognising space as a realisation of class. For example, when I met participants in community fridges and homeless shelters, I was able to observe those spaces as a realisation of class, as it was class disparities and inequalities that have played a major role in the creation of such spaces. By this, I mean that the context discussed in the previous chapter (neoliberalism and austerity) have created the necessity for these spaces, with growing levels of inequality and more visible class distinctions in terms of the people who utilise such spaces.

Biographies of place

Basic and official definitions of place are centred on areas with boundaries and, whether these are definite or indefinite, are given a name (*see Gersmehl 2008 cited in Warren & Garthwaite 2014*). By this definition, Warren and Garthwaite (*ibid.*) argue that places are no more than 'containers' – passive categories utilised by governments to commodify individuals and communities. While recognising that the pressures of bureaucracy and planning of state institutions do play some role in shaping places, the authors give recognition to geographical analyses which display the significance of location in the creation of inequalities.

Heeding the advice of Wright Mills (1959), Warren and Garthwaite (*ibid.*: 116) argue that: "Personal histories are both constrained and enabled by the character of place." They propose a reconceptualisation of place whereby researchers *must* understand and recognise the history of a community if they are to fully understand the lives of individuals within that community – they call this practice 'biography of place'. Utilising a biography of place means that place can be utilised in both research and practice more effectively.

As part of the development of this research case study, a biography of place will be described. While the next section of this chapter provides a brief overview and argument in

favour of the case study location, a more detailed overview will be provided, supported by empirical evidence, in the first chapter of the findings (Chapter 4).

3.4 Access and Sampling

The literature review highlights that the way that the precariat is utilised and conceptualised differs vastly, even amongst the theorists who support the use of the term. Therefore, in order to choose a sample population, I made the decision to utilise Savage's (2015) framework for identifying participants for this study. This was decided for three reasons. Firstly, unlike the other main proponents of the theory, Savage's research is limited to Britain, which aligns with the context for this research. Secondly, Savage's research gained significant traction in and out of academia (*see, for example*, BBC 2013; Jones 2013). And thirdly, as was demonstrated in the literature review, both Standing (2011) and Foti (2017) made confusing claims about the precariat and its membership that create ambiguities that make finding a sample population difficult (if not impossible) to define.

In the literature the following quote from Savage et al. (2013: 243) was used and is the closest that Savage gets to a definition of the precariat:

“This is economically the poorest class, with a household income of only £8k, negligible savings, and they are likely to rent. Their social range is small with an average of seven contacts whose mean status is the lowest of any of the classes. [...] they form a relatively large social class, with 15 per cent of the population. [...] It's members are unlikely to have attended university. Occupationally they are over-represented amongst the unemployed, van drivers, cleaners, carpenters, care workers, cashiers and postal workers, and they also include shopkeepers.”

Based on a reading of Savage's work on the theory, and the parameters of the case study, the following criteria was set for choosing participants:

- Must be a resident of Bournemouth or Poole;
- Must be on either Universal Credit (or equivalent) or a zero-hours contract;
- Must not be a student;
- Must not own property;
- Must be over 18.

While class position and locality formed the primary basis for participant selection, it is important to acknowledge that participants' experiences of precarity were also shaped by intersecting social positions, including gender, ethnicity, migration status, disability and citizenship (*see* Appendix G for an overview of the demographics of the participants). This thesis understands class not as an isolated axis of inequality but as one that is lived and experienced through its interaction with other structural conditions. However, the starting point for the research stemmed from traditional studies of social class and how economic, social and cultural characteristics interrelate and how this could be applied to the contemporary phenomenon of precarity. As such the research uses economic measures of precarity to identify potential participants for the research. Making intersectional dimensions part of the recruitment criteria was considered during the study design and recruitment phase but was not prioritised due to the issue of access and the need to use snowballing techniques to generate the sample. The approach was to use the economic measure of precarity as the core sampling criteria and use this as a basis for a commonality of lived experience and to record and consider intersectional dimensions once the sample was developed. Given the diversity of intersectional dimensions that would need to be covered (e.g., migration status x ethnicity x disability status x gender x citizenship x sexuality and the multiple dimensions that exist across each of these dimensions) across the characteristics identified above and this being a relatively small-scale qualitative study it would not be possible to represent the intersectional diversity across these dimensions. This led to a reaffirmation of the primary focus on social class but, in so doing not discarding the notion that intersectional structural disadvantage exists within this. The main characteristic alongside social class that was considered in recruitment was gender, to have a roughly proportionate mix of participants in the study.

The above criteria provided a basis for purposive sampling. First, access to community organisations, like community centres, community fridges and homeless shelters, was sought through initial email contact, with an attached information sheet (Appendix A). The participants were often difficult to engage, because they are vulnerable and often isolated. Therefore, earning the support and trust of gatekeepers was vital to the success of this research. The names of the specific organisations will not be used in this thesis, to protect the anonymity of the participants. However, the initial contact with gatekeepers was aimed at community centres, foodbanks and local homeless charities. After gaining access to these spaces, recruiting participants required ethnographic practices. In some instances, I spent whole days in community centres becoming a familiar and trusted face, so that potential participants were more willing to be interviewed (*see* Appendix F for a breakdown of time spent in each space, and an overview of ethnographic activities). A process of snowball sampling helped to gain more participants and access to other organisations and gatekeepers. The use of snowball sampling further shaped the composition of the sample, as participants tended to refer others within similar social networks. This meant that experiences of precarity were often clustered along shared lines of class position, gender, ethnicity or migration history. While this facilitated trust and access, it also highlights how intersecting inequalities structure social ties and influence whose experiences circulate within research settings.

The process of accessing participants was itself shaped by intersecting inequalities. Certain voices were more readily accessible through community organisations, particularly those already engaged with welfare, housing or support services. In contrast, individuals with insecure migration status, limited English proficiency, experiences of racialisation, or deep mistrust of institutions were often harder to reach or more hesitant to participate. Similarly, participants with disabilities, mental health conditions, or caring responsibilities were less accessible through the sampling strategy and the results should be qualified in this respect.

The target number of participants for the initial semi-structured interviews was 40, but this number was dependent upon reaching a point of saturation. However, it became clear after 40 semi-structured interviews that saturation had been achieved, whereby similar data and feedback was being received.

Moreover, the sample was not skewed, in terms of gender, with an almost equal number of male and female participants. Six of the participants were non-English and four were non-white. This means that 10% of the participants were non-white, which is 1.3% higher than the most recent statistics for the region (ONS 2023). So, while this qualitative study is not representative of Bournemouth and Poole as a whole, its participants do, to quite a good extent, represent the ethnic makeup of the area. Although the sample reflects some diversity in terms of gender and ethnicity, the thesis does not offer a systematic intersectional analysis of how these dimensions interact with class in shaping precarity. This was a deliberate limitation of scope rather than an absence of relevance. The primary analytical focus on class and locality was necessary to maintain coherence within the thesis, but this inevitably constrained the depth at which other structural inequalities could be explored. Rather than treating these dimensions as secondary or incidental, the thesis recognises them as analytically important and as a basis for future research that could more fully examine the intersection of class with race, gender, migration status, disability and citizenship.

Participants met via homeless support organisations were remunerated for their time, each being given £5 for taking part in a semi-structured interview and/or a walking interview. This decision was taken as the homeless are a particularly difficult group to reach and an incentive was needed to gain trust. This decision gained ethical approval and will be discussed in more detail later in the ethics section of this chapter.

After 40 interviews, it was appropriate to begin the next stage of data collection, which included walking interviews and focus groups (these are discussed further in section 3.7), as a way of facilitating the interpretation and analysis of the data. The focus groups utilised an element of convenience sampling, as finding times for 5+ of the initial 40 participants to take part was very difficult. Therefore, in each focus group there were two people who had not previously partaken in an interview. However, both people were people I had met previously and were aware of my research, due to my ethnographic practices.

3.5 Ontology and epistemology

Complex realism, as an ontology, is a philosophical approach that underscores the intricate and multifaceted nature of reality (Reed & Harvey 1992). It holds that the world is not a simple or monolithic entity, but rather consists of a vast array of layers, systems, and dimensions, all of which are deeply interconnected. This perspective challenges reductionist or overly simplistic models of reality by emphasising the complexity that characterises human existence and the world at large (Byrne 2011). Rather than seeing reality as a series of binary oppositions – such as good versus evil or true versus false – complex realism embraces the idea that reality is multifaceted, and that these layers often contain contradictions, tensions, and ambiguities (Byrne & Callaghan 2014). It recognises that meanings, truths, and knowledge are not fixed or universal but are deeply context-dependent, shaped by a variety of factors that influence how individuals and societies perceive and interpret the world around them. As such, studies, like this one, that adopt a complex realist ontological perspective seek to capture the dynamic, ever-changing, and complex nature of existence (Reed & Harvey 1992). These studies are particularly concerned with exploring the ways in which human experience is inherently uncertain and ambiguous, recognising that certainty is often elusive and that multiple interpretations of a given phenomenon are not only possible but inevitable (Byrne 2011; Williams 2021). This definition fits in well with an understanding of precarity and the so-called ‘precariat’, due to the ambiguity of the terms and the phenomena and experiences they seek to capture and represent.

From an epistemological standpoint, complex realism asserts that objective knowledge is indeed attainable, albeit not in the straightforward, definitive manner that some forms of positivism might suggest. As Williams (2021: 203) states, “There can be objective knowledge”, but this knowledge is not absolute or detached from the subjective realities of those who seek to understand it. Complex realism acknowledges the existence of social facts – those aspects of reality that, while not physically tangible, still possess real-world consequences and implications. For example, social constructs like race, gender, and class may not have a physical presence in the same way that objects do, but they undeniably shape human experience and behaviour, thus making them critical areas of study in understanding the world. Despite

this, complex realism maintains that all knowledge, even when objective in some respects, is always filtered through human perception and interpretation, which means that it is always partial and incomplete.

Moreover, complex realism emphasises the limitations inherent in human cognition and perception. It recognises that individuals do not have access to a totalising or all-encompassing truth, but instead are constrained by their personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and historical contexts (Williams 2021; Byrne 2019). In this way, our understanding of the world is inevitably shaped by our own biases, assumptions, and perspectives. While complex realism acknowledges the existence of social facts, it also highlights the role of interpretation and context in shaping how these facts are understood. In this sense, knowledge is always a product of social and historical processes, rather than an objective, neutral reality that exists independently of human experience.

In keeping with this view, complex realism also emphasises the importance of incorporating multiple perspectives and ways of knowing into the process of knowledge construction (Williams 2021). It rejects the notion of a singular, objective truth that can be universally applied to all contexts. Instead, it asserts that knowledge is plural and that different perspectives – shaped by diverse cultural, social, and historical factors – can offer valuable insights into complex phenomena. This approach values the richness of human experience and recognises that no single viewpoint can capture the full depth and complexity of the world. Consequently, complex realism encourages critical reflection and dialogue as essential components of the search for truth. By engaging with different viewpoints and examining the ways in which knowledge is constructed, complex realism seeks to foster a more nuanced, inclusive, and dynamic understanding of the world (Byrne & Callaghan 2014).

In summary, complex realism aligns with my personal understandings of what is helpful for social research of this nature to achieve its end goals of illuminating social ills. While its complexity allows for a nuanced understanding, an element of realism is necessary for engaging with the lived experiences and stories of the participants.

3.6 Methods

The main method I used was semi-structured interviews. This was where the bulk of data collection came from, with 40 participants taking part in these. These interviews were followed by walking interviews, where five of the participants gave me a tour of their local areas. The five participants were chosen based on the fact they occupied different areas in Bournemouth and Poole. Lastly, two focus groups offered the opportunity for participants to discuss my initial findings and create more data. The participants for the focus groups were chosen based on the most helpful and accommodating organisations and gatekeepers who I had met throughout the interview process, so I knew I could rely on them to support my efforts to regain participation.

Alongside these data collection tools, I also kept a research diary. This allowed me to be more reflective in my process.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews provided the first stage of data collection for the primary research. Semi-structured interviews allowed me a flexible and iterative approach to questioning. For example, during the early interviews mental health came up a lot, despite no questions about mental health being on the interview guide. Therefore, as it began to emerge as a major theme, it was added to the interview guide (*see* Appendix D), as a prompt.

The semi-structured interviews all started with the same question: “what is your life story?” The life story method is an important tool among sociologists, with well-known theorists utilising the approach (*see, for example*, Becker 1976). It allows the participant to provide a narrative that is more free-from interference by the interviewer than a more standardised interview – as it: allows the participant to narrate “[...] one’s entire experience of life as a whole, highlighting the most important aspects.” (Atkinson 1998: 8). This allows the researcher greater insight into the meanings that “[...] reveal how a specific human life is constructed and reconstructed in representing that life as a story.” (ibid.: 116). Therefore, rather

than the researcher pre-deciding what topics are most important, the participants own stories dictate the direction of the following questions. This, in turn, aligns with the extended case method, as it allows a researcher to ‘discover larger worlds’, and be critical of societal structures (Burawoy 1998).

How people reacted to the question – “what is your life story?” – varied. Some participants spoke for an hour uninterrupted, and others summarised their lives in no more than a few minutes. Therefore, prompts and add-on questions, such as ‘where did you grow up?’ and ‘what did your parents do for work?’ were required in some instances.

The following reflections about the participants’ life stories were made in the research diary (06/04/2023):

“The reason I want to do this research is to give voice to people who don’t usually have one and write a fair representation which does not paint poor people as being in-any-way deserving of their position. But it’s hard to get that across to people when you’re the outsider.

Moreover, most people do not understand university research. Even me, at the start of my PhD, didn’t really know what a PhD was – and I was doing one! So I can’t expect people who have never done an undergraduate degree to understand what the point [of the research] is.

Also, to these people they are just normal. And, they are. But for that reason, they do not understand how much value and insight their life experiences offer. And, is that such a surprise? After a lifetime of being given little recognition for the difficult life experiences they’ve overcome, and having to rely on very little welfare, the people I have met here are unsurprisingly not confident that they have anything to offer.

It’s such a shame that the majority of the people I’ve met here do not think that they can offer any value by talking to me about their lives. But they really could. These people, most of which went through horrific traumatic childhood experiences, never experienced financial stability and are in a constant battle with their own mental health, and still live to tell the tale, have life experience that is invaluable for all. But these

same incredibly strong, resilient and adaptive people lack that understanding of themselves.”

This entry was made on a day where the research was becoming particularly frustrating. herein lies an issue with the life story interview. For many people in precarity and poverty, convincing them to take part in research was extremely challenging, because of how little they valued their own knowledge and understandings. Therefore, once they have agreed to a sit-down interview, to be asked outright ‘what is your life story?’ was not always going to be greeted with a long and in-depth response, for the same reasoning. However, I took an ethnographic approach to the recruitment process, spending entire days becoming involved in community centres and building rapport with potential participants. This, in the end, allowed good data to be collected from this initial life-story question.

Each interview ended with the same question: “what class are you?” As this thesis seeks to, in some ways, challenge the notion of the precariat as a class, this question at the end of the semi-structured interviews was utilised to gain a last explicit understanding of class, to add further insight to the implicit class understandings gained from the rest of the interview. This decision was made during the first interview when class was not mentioned at all by the participant, despite having read an information sheet that made it clear that class was the focus of this research. Therefore, I decided to add this final question to end of the interview guide (*see Appendix D*).

All the semi-structured interviews took place in a community organisations premises, such as an office of a community centre or the garden of a homeless shelter. The longest interview was over two hours long, but there were some interviews that lasted no longer than 15 minutes.

Walking interviews

Walking interviews allowed me to gain a better understanding of the case study location and the place where people experience life, by removing barriers created by the power imbalance of a sit-down interview (Clark & Emmel 2010; Evans & Jones 2011).

There are multiple methods for walking interviews, but Chang's (2017) docent method was mobilised for this research. According to this method, the participant is treated as the expert, which, again limits the power imbalance of the researcher-participant relationship. Moreover, participants for walking interviews were chosen based on rapport built during semi-structured interviews. However, unlike Chang's method, the walking interviews were not recorded and transcribed. Instead, notes were taken immediately after the interviews were completed. This was a decision based on limiting the power imbalance, but also for ethical reasons, that will be discussed later in this chapter.

The walking interviews were organised with participants and gatekeepers in advance and were all around 30 minutes long. Participants were allowed to choose the route and then the route-plan was discussed before starting. This took me to local parks known for drug usage, behind shops where the homeless could find valuable items in large bins and gave me a good perspective on what the local area *looks like* to the participants. The method was great for gaining extra knowledge of how the participants experience place, as the walks covered over 2 kilometres each, around various housing estates, retail districts, and parks. This method allowed me to see the places differently, and notice things I wouldn't usually notice. For example, the visible drug use which is such a part of urban life that it normally slips through one's conscious mind. Notes taken after each interview had little structure, they were as expansive-as-possible notes about everything that had been discussed.

Focus groups

The data collection finished with two focus groups. These followed an initial analysis of the data, so that the general findings could be discussed, and so that the participants could collaborate, challenge and/or reinforce the findings.

The aim of a focus group is for collaborative discussion to, “[...] allow participants to co-construct shared meanings.” (Morgan 2012: 174). This is what separates focus groups from interviews – the interviewer role is replaced for that of a moderator/facilitator (McCormack, Anderson, Jamie & David 2018).

One focus group was held in a community centre and the other was held in a homeless shelter. Wilkinson (1998) states that focus groups are most successful when the groups are relatively homogenous. So, instead of attempting to bring together past-participants from all of the different sites where interviews had been held, the two most accommodating community centres were chosen. One of the focus groups, at the community centre, had five participants (three male and two female). The other focus group, at the homeless shelter, had four participants (all male). There was a mix of participants who had already taken part in semi-structured interviews and others who had not, in both focus groups. As touched on in section 3.7, my ethnographic approach to building a trusting relationship with potential participants meant that the additional focus group members were people I had previously interacted with, despite them not being able to take part in an initial semi-structured interview.

The participants were asked questions about their local community to begin with. This was followed up with questions on mental health. Most often, focus groups are based around conversations of topics pre-determined by the moderator. However, other methods are becoming more common, such as games and reaction to documentary footage (Morgan 2012). After an initial analysis of the semi-structured interviews, it was determined that national politics was something that many participants did not feel confident discussing, therefore the focus groups were also presented with images of prominent politicians (Boris Johnson, Rishi Sunak, Jeremy Corbyn and Keir Starmer; *see* Appendix E) as a way of producing more conversation – this was a successful approach, as more data on the participants’ attitudes

towards national politics was gained in the two focus groups than from the previous 40 semi-structured interviews.

3.7 Analysis and writing

After the semi-structured interviews were completed, the next step was to transcribe the recordings. These transcriptions were compiled verbatim to ensure that every detail of the interviews was accurately captured for further analysis.

The second method, the walking interviews, presented a unique challenge. These interviews were not recorded, so instead of transcribing audio, extensive notes were taken immediately following each session. The notes were detailed and comprehensive, capturing key themes, insights, and observations that emerged during the conversations. This approach ensured that the data from the walking interviews was not lost, even though it was not captured in audio format.

Finally, once the focus groups were concluded, they were transcribed. The transcriptions of both the semi-structured interviews and the focus groups provided a rich source of textual data that was then subjected to further analysis.

The chosen method for analysing the transcribed data was thematic analysis, which aimed to identify patterns, themes, and key concepts within the transcribed material (*see* Bryman 2015; Merriam & Tisdell 2016). This analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase guide to thematic analysis. Firstly, I became familiar with the data through the process of transcribing the data and then reading it all through. This was a long process which meant I was very familiar with my data by the end of it. Secondly, I identified and labelled initial codes, creating a colour key as I highlighted quotes from the transcripts. Next, the codes were grouped into themes before then reviewing that the codes fit within the themes and then were named. The final step was to write-up the findings and present the data. Moreover, Braun and Clarke's (*ibid.*) process encourages reflexivity, whereby I was able to recognise my own role as the interpreter of the data, and able to embrace my own feelings instead of attempting to act as a passive observer of the data.

Furthermore, the content analysis was guided by an inductive coding process, which is a bottom-up approach that allows for codes and sub-codes to emerge directly from the data. The process involved multiple readings of the transcripts to ensure that the data was thoroughly reviewed and that relevant themes were accurately identified.

However, it is important to note that, while the inductive approach aims to allow themes to emerge organically from the data, it is not entirely free from deductive influences. Specifically, since the analysis was conducted by the same person who performed the research (me), there is an inevitable amount of subconscious deductive coding that occurred during the process. This is a natural aspect of qualitative research, as researchers bring their own knowledge and perspectives into the analysis. For instance, throughout the research, mental health had consistently appeared as a significant and recurring theme. As a result, it was not entirely inductive to create codes specifically related to mental health during the coding process, since this issue had already been highlighted through the researcher's observations and previous data collection. This kind of overlap between inductive and deductive coding is a common occurrence in qualitative research and reflects the complexity and fluidity of the analysis process. The process also aligned with Timmerman and Tavory's (2012) overview of abductive coding – a process where the researcher can reflect on theory and go back and forth between theory and data. This was an unavoidable part of the process, as one of the central aims of this thesis is to challenge a theory. So, to summarise the coding process, while I attempted to *do* inductive coding, I recognise, and am able to reflect on, my own positionality as having influenced the coding process so that they were deductive (I had some rough idea of codes that might emerge) and abductive (I was coding while reflecting on the theoretical literature).

To further enhance the reflexivity of the research process, a research diary was kept throughout the study. The diary allowed me to document thoughts, feelings, and insights that arose during the research. It encouraged critical self-awareness and a deeper understanding of how my personal biases, assumptions, and experiences might influence the research process. The research diary was an essential component in maintaining transparency and ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in the data, while also acknowledging my role in interpreting and shaping the findings (McCormack, Anderson, Jamie & David 2018).

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the findings chapters incorporate a substantial amount of literature to contextualise the findings. Since the study was designed to allow themes to emerge organically from the data, it was not possible to pre-empt which themes would be most prominent. This is a common feature of qualitative research, where the focus of the study evolves as the data is collected and analysed (Ragin & Becker 1992). For example, the initial literature review did not focus heavily on mental health literature, as this topic had not yet been identified as a central theme at that stage. However, as mental health emerged as a significant issue throughout the interviews and focus groups, it became essential to revisit the literature and incorporate relevant studies on mental health. This flexibility in the research design allowed for a more responsive and accurate representation of the themes that were most salient to the participants, ensuring that the study's findings were both comprehensive and reflective of the lived experiences of those involved.

In summary, the research process involved careful and systematic transcription, followed by a thematic analysis that allowed for the emergence of key themes. The use of a research diary and the incorporation of literature throughout the write-up helped to ensure the study's reflexivity and rigour, allowing for an evolving and responsive approach to the analysis. The dynamic nature of the research process meant that the study was able to adapt to the themes that emerged, providing a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

3.8 Ethics, confidentiality, and consent

Before interviews took place, all participants were presented with an information sheet and a privacy notice. This meant that they were able to give informed consent and understood their rights. As part of this, it was made clear to participants that they would remain anonymous. All the participants also signed a consent form (Appendix B). Ethical approval was granted on 17th January 2023, from the Department of Sociology, Ethics Committee in Durham University.

As the participants were often financially insecure and had experienced traumatic lived experiences, there was a risk of harm. Many of the participants suffer from mental health

illnesses and, therefore, part of the ethics was to ensure that the researcher was able to highlight and help participants to access mental health resources if necessary. Fortunately, this did not become necessary at any point, despite it emerging as a key finding. While this thesis argues that mental health treatments are ineffective, none of the participants needed any direction from me as to where to get treatment. Moreover, while my ethics recognised the chance that some of my participants would suffer from ill-mental health, it was not a pre-determined theme because I did not expect such a vast majority of the participants to discuss mental health issues.

All data was collected at public locations that were convenient for the participants, such as community centres and homeless shelters. This ensured my safety and helped create a safe space for the participant to speak. The only exception to this rule was walking interviews. Walking interviews were arranged in daylight hours and participants were met in the community centres where they had originally been interviewed. The route taken for the walking interviews were pre-arranged. As the walking interviews took place in spaces where there is heavy drug use, walking interviews were not recorded. This was to help ensure the safety of both the participant and the researcher, as a recording device would have drawn attention to the interview and could be misinterpreted.

The main issue facing the recruitment for this research was the recruitment of homeless people. It is important to clarify that reimbursement was offered only to participants recruited via homelessness organisations, and not to participants recruited through community centres. This decision reflected the markedly different material conditions under which participation took place. Participants experiencing homelessness often faced immediate financial insecurity, limited access to food or transport, and competing survival priorities, meaning that participation in research entailed a tangible cost. In contrast, participants recruited through community centres were typically already engaged in support services and participated during existing visits to those spaces. The decision to only reimburse homeless participants was therefore intended to reduce barriers to participation and recognise unequal conditions of vulnerability, rather than to create differential value between participants. More specifically, the reimbursement served both to offset the practical costs of taking part (such as time, travel, or missed opportunities to access services) and to acknowledge the extreme financial insecurity many participants were experiencing. There is a lot of literature and debate regarding how to ethically recruit homeless people to participate in research. Schonfeld, Brown, Weniger &

Gordon (2003) make an argument in favour of giving homeless people cash, rather than payment-in-kind. One of the main arguments against giving homeless people money for participation is that they are more likely to spend it on harmful products, like tobacco and alcohol, than the average person. However, the authors (ibid.: 18) argue that this view is prejudiced against the homeless: “People do all sorts of harmful things with their money. Yet, we do not place restrictions on the purchases of non-homeless adults.” Moreover, the authors (ibid.: 18) also argue that payment-in-kind, rather than payment-in-cash, is an assault on the autonomy of the individuals: “[...] paying participants in kind because of fear of misuse of monetary compensation would be an unjustified infringement of a subject’s autonomy.” This argument is supported by Grady (2001), who urges researchers to recognise that offering cash-payments to the homeless can have a really positive impact on the quality of data being collected. She argues that paying participants a non-excessive amount which is a fair representation of the time they are giving up, creates a good level of respect between the researcher and the participant, meaning that that will be more likely to take greater care in their responses. This meant that the homeless participants were willing to share more information. I submitted an additional ethics application for this, as it was not part of the original plan. Ethical approval for this was granted on 16th May 2023 by the Ethics Committee in the Department of Sociology.

This decision also sits within a broader ethical tension that shaped the research: the desire to centre the voices of marginalised participants, while recognising that doctoral research necessarily requires interpretation, synthesis, and theoretical contribution by the researcher. While participants’ accounts were treated as authoritative expressions of their lived experience, the thesis does not present these narratives as unmediated or beyond critique. Instead, participant voices are situated within wider structural and theoretical debates, acknowledging both the importance of representation and the researcher’s responsibility to analyse, contextualise and contribute original insight. This tension was navigated through reflexive engagement with power, authorship and responsibility throughout the research process. A complex realist understanding, in which social structures are considered to be real but frequently changing and non-deterministic, informed this.

Participants did not always offer consistent accounts, and some perspectives conflicted with one another or with existing academic evidence. These contradictions were not treated as

inaccuracies to be corrected, but as ethically and analytically significant. Rather than privileging certain accounts as more valid, the research sought to understand how differing perspectives reflected variation in biography, social position, and lived experience of precarity. Where participant narratives diverged from established research findings, these tensions were explored through engagement with the literature, allowing lived experience and academic evidence to be placed in dialogue rather than opposition. This approach reflects an ethical commitment to respecting participants' voices while maintaining a critical distance.

3.9 Reflexivity, interpretation, and knowledge

In terms of positionality, I am not *from* the place but had lived there for several years before developing the research and did consider it as my *home*. Moreover, despite being from a working-class background, my upbringing was far less precarious and traumatic than many of the participants I interviewed. However, I did not *know* this before taking on the research. Moreover, there were some participants who could be described as 'downwardly mobile' and who had enjoyed a subjectively less precarious upbringing than my own, having, for example, come from privileged backgrounds, including attending private schools.

Conducting the primary research caused personal reflections about my own habitus. I made some of the following comments in my research diary (27/01/2023):

“People seemed to notice me as an outsider immediately, but were friendly none-the-less, despite maybe being somewhat cautious.”

“Before I went, I was very conscious of how I'd come across. I took a long time deciding whether to wear jeans or trackies. It's hard to get me in a pair of jeans, but I had this fear that if I turned up in trackies I'd look like this university person trying his hardest to appear 'like them'. I've never felt as middle class as I did today.”

These statements reflect my own inner conflicts. I found it difficult being the ‘university bloke’, as I was often referred to as. I was even referred to as ‘the professor’, on a couple of occasions. While undertaking the research I was also working part-time as a Lecturer at the local university, which I also reflected on (20/06/2023):

“Today, I was the university lecturer, a quintessentially and undeniably middle-class profession. It felt odd and unsettling.”

I made a decision to gather all of the data from participants who could be deemed as part of the precariat, according to the sampling criteria I had established based on the literature. Along my way, I met many people who I could have interviewed, such as local politicians, local government workers and social prescribers. However, I recognised that my ability to speak to such people would only be representative of my privileges as the ‘university bloke’. I decided that I wanted to avoid interviewing these people. This decision could be justified from a theoretical reasoning, but in-truth I made this decision based on my own belief that it was not necessary and may actually be harmful if I produced research of that nature as these are not the people I wanted to centre. I’ve already displayed, through the literature review, how the so-called ‘precariat’ are over-theorised and over-debated, so I felt it would be wrong of me to take data from people just talking *about them*. I started with a fundamental belief that the people I was researching do not *need* others to tell me about their lived-experience, they are more than capable of eloquently doing-so themselves. This view is shared by Savage (2015: 335), in his own writings on the precariat – he noted that:

“It is rarely considered by the general public when observing working class people and neighbourhoods, that working class people, and especially the poor working class, the precariat, can know or understand themselves and their situation, and that they can articulate their understandings, perceptions and feelings extremely well.”

The following three chapters vindicate my decision.

4. Lived experience

The chapter begins by providing a biography of place, before extending the biography of place by discussing findings from this research, where participants were asked about their local communities – with the main talking points being around homelessness and addiction, crime and violence, community spaces, and struggles finding work. This sets the scene for the rest of the chapter, which then discusses the findings related to the welfare state and, more specifically, Universal Credit (UC). This leads on to a discussion to one of the biggest day-to-day issues facing many participants, which is food poverty. Lastly, this section finishes with a section on homelessness, as many participants have either experienced homelessness in the past or are currently experiencing it.

Before presenting the findings, it is important to note that participants' accounts often contained contradictions. From a complex realist perspective, these contradictions are not treated as inconsistencies or misunderstandings, but as analytically significant. Participants' narratives reflect the interaction between lived material conditions and the dominant social and political discourses through which those conditions are interpreted.

4.1 Biography of place

This biography of place utilises the outlining provided by Warren and Garthwaite (2014), as was discussed in chapter 3. I first focus on the issues facing seaside communities, in a general sense, before providing a brief history of my case study locations. I then conclude with a biography of place before supplementing this with the data I have gathered.

4.1.1 Seaside communities

Seaside towns are sites where the working-class have been marginalised from academic/public debate. This relative invisibility has been noted within regional studies literature, which has historically prioritised former manufacturing regions over tourism-dependent coastal economies, despite evidence that the latter experience comparable levels of deprivation and labour market fragility (Williams & Shaw 2009; Beatty, Fothergill & Gore 2014). Unlike former industrial towns, where deindustrialisation has seen the removal of the key industries which shaped their culture and provided a sense of community, seaside towns have not been regarded in the same way or been investigated to such an extent.

The towns in the former industrial heartlands have suffered greatly, with high unemployment and deprivation, often because of the removal of just one key industry – e.g., a mine or a factory. However, it is often overlooked that seaside towns are also ‘one industry’ towns – tourism is *the* one industry (Beatty & Fothergill 2004). Research on tourism-dependent local economies demonstrates that reliance on seasonal, low-paid service work reproduces many of the same vulnerabilities observed in post-industrial regions, including weak employment multipliers, limited skills development, and restricted opportunities for occupational mobility (Agarwal, Rahman & Errington 2000). Therefore, the patterns of deprivation affecting industrial communities have much in common in the socioeconomic conditions of seaside towns (Agarwal et al. 2018). However, the image of the traditional working-class is of miners and factory workers, rather than the various employees who work in tourist resorts.

Fiorentino et al. (2024) describe coastal towns as “left-behind places”, blaming socio-economic, environmental, and governance issues for preventing the regeneration of once-popular and respected tourist resorts. It is only in recent times that foreign holidays have become affordable and *normal* for a large percentage of the British population. Not only is the weather more reliable, but they can also often be cheaper than a stay in Britain. These changes have coincided with the wilful neglect of British tourist resorts by continuous governments, much like the neglect suffered in former industrial communities (Beatty & Fothergill 2004). Leonard (2016) further illustrates this point by focusing on how migration patterns, particularly

among middle-life individuals seeking stability, affect local socio-economic conditions, given that they have less need for long-term employment, as they see seaside towns as sites for retirement, but also, as older and relatively wealthy people, drive up the need for people employed in the service industries. This framing aligns with broader analyses of spatial inequality in the UK, which emphasise how policy attention and investment have disproportionately favoured metropolitan and growth-oriented regions, leaving both coastal and former industrial areas subject to long-term political and economic neglect (Martin et al. 2016; Beatty, Fothergill & Gore 2014).

The employment structure in seaside towns has been marked by a predominance of part-time jobs and high unemployment rates. Beatty and Fothergill (2004) reported that seaside towns have a higher proportion of part-time employment compared to national averages, leading to vulnerabilities in the local labour market. McDowell et al. (2020) delve into the experiences of young working-class men in these areas, emphasising their precarious employment situations and the impact of substance use as a coping mechanism for economic despair. In contrast, Reid and Westergaard (2017) highlight the resilience exhibited by young people facing unemployment in coastal communities. However, their findings indicate that whilst individual resilience is important, it is often overshadowed by structural barriers to employment and economic stability. Studies of labour markets in tourist resorts further highlight how insecure and fragmented employment limits the formation of stable working-class identities, contributing to cycles of underemployment and out-migration among younger residents (Williams & Shaw 2009).

Housing conditions play a critical role in the socio-economic landscape of seaside resorts. Agarwal et al. (2018) identify low-cost private rental markets as factors exacerbating deprivation, particularly for vulnerable populations like benefit claimants and students. This sentiment is echoed in Ward (2015), who explores the challenges faced by residents of Houses in Multiple Occupation in the seaside town of Ilfracombe, revealing poor housing quality and a lack of support from landlords and local authorities. Scholars have also noted that coastal towns have become sites of welfare sorting, where low-cost private rentals and HMOs concentrate economically marginalised populations, reinforcing stigma while simultaneously masking the structural drivers of deprivation (Ward 2015; Fletcher & Wright 2018).

The role of heritage in the regeneration of seaside towns has received attention in recent literature. For example, Light and Chapman (2022) investigate how community activism and state initiatives have led to a growing recognition of seaside heritage, which has potential for economic renewal. They argue that understanding and valorising seaside heritage can play a crucial role in revitalisation efforts, contributing to local pride and tourism. However, Fiorentino et al. (2024) caution that regeneration initiatives often prioritise short-term, tangible outcomes over long-term strategies that consider the socio-economic context and environmental challenges. This disjointed approach can undermine efforts to create sustainable, thriving communities.

To summarise, the socio-economic challenges facing English seaside resorts are multifaceted, involving issues of deprivation, housing instability, precarious employment, and the complexities of heritage and community identity.

4.1.2 Biographies of place

Bournemouth – a short history

Bournemouth's story begins deep in the soil of prehistory. The earliest known inhabitant of the area – what became known as the “Bournemouth man” – was unearthed at Longham in 1932. Later found to be a woman, the Neolithic remains mark the first known evidence of human life in Bournemouth (Edwards 1981). Centuries later, after Roman withdrawal around A.D. 400, Saxon settlers drifted into the river valleys, preferring their shelter to the wild heathlands. However, there remains little trace of their settlements (Edwards 1981).

At that time, Bournemouth was not yet a town, nor even a village, but rather a wild expanse of heath flanked by cliffs and peppered with chimes, nestled between the historic towns of Poole and Christchurch. Though the name ‘la Bournemowthe’ appears in a 1407 Christchurch cartulary, it referred only to a geographical feature – the mouth of a stream (Edwards 1981). In the 18th century, this remote coastal stretch was a haven for smugglers

(Morley 1983). Among those tasked with policing the coast was Captain Lewis Tregonwell, stationed with the Dorset Rangers at nearby barracks built in 1795. His later transition from smuggler-catcher to settler earned him the title of Bournemouth's founder (Edwards 1981). By building cottages for summer let and planting pine trees, Tregonwell, both figuratively and literally, planted the seeds of what would become a fashionable resort (Edwards 1981; Boudreau & Dodds 1988).

To the east lay the ancient village of Holdenhurst, regarded as the "mother of Bournemouth." (Edwards 1981). Other nearby villages were similarly steeped in history. Kinson, on Bournemouth's northern edge, was one of the last to be incorporated into the town. Its historic character suffered from mid-20th-century development, including the loss of Howe Lodge, an elegant 18th-century home built by a smuggler, demolished in 1958 despite public protest (Edwards 1981).

The early 19th century also saw land enclosures impact the region. In response, groups of labourers appealed to local landowners like Farmer West of Muscliffe, who helped them petition commissioners. This advocacy contributed to the preservation of common land, which today endures in the form of Meyrick Park, Queen's Park, and King's Park (Edwards 1981).

From humble beginnings, Bournemouth began to grow. In 1851, its population stood at just 695, but by 1881 it had swelled to nearly 17,000 (Edwards 1981). This expansion coincided with the town's rise as a seaside resort. A wooden pier was opened in 1861, followed by an iron one in 1880. Yet for over two decades, landowners resisted a railway station, fearing it would attract the "wrong sort" of people. It wasn't until 1870 that Bournemouth's first station opened (Mate 2014).

As the town expanded, the working-class faced challenges related to housing and living conditions. In the 1850s, Terrace Road housed numerous building artisans and their families, often in cramped and substandard accommodations. The rapid construction led to areas where buildings were hastily erected without coordinated planning, resulting in poor living conditions for many workers (Edwards 1981).

Amidst these challenges, philanthropic efforts emerged to improve the lives of the working-class residents. In the mid-19th century, Georgina and Mary Talbot, sisters from a wealthy background, established Talbot Village near Winton (Edwards 1998). They built

cottages for the unemployed, providing homes with wells and fruit trees, and later added almshouses for the elderly. This initiative aimed to offer better living conditions and support to the working-class population.

As the affluent flocked to the town's new villas, workers were pushed to the outskirts. Boscombe and Springbourne developed as working-class districts, housing the artisans and labourers who built and maintained Bournemouth's growing infrastructure (Edwards 1981). Winton, too, saw a rapid influx of labourers, drawn by construction jobs and a booming brick and gravel industry. The scars left by this excavation formed many of the roads between Winton and Charminster today, including Calvin, Cranmer, and Luther roads (Edwards 1981). By the 1880s, the demand for skilled workers such as carpenters, bricklayers, and painters surged, with many residing in areas like Terrace Road, which became known as a 'labourers' ghetto' (Edwards 1981). These workers played a crucial role in building the town's villas, piers, and other structures.

The town's genteel character began to shift with improved travel and the introduction of Bank Holidays in 1871 (Boudreau & Dodds 1988). Once a retreat for the elite, Bournemouth's beaches began drawing large crowds who came for sand, sea, and seaside amusements like Punch and Judy shows (Edwards 1981; Mate 2014). The arrival of the railway in 1870 was a pivotal moment for Bournemouth, facilitating easier access for visitors and contributing to the town's economic growth. The railway not only brought tourists but also provided employment opportunities for the working-class in various sectors, including hospitality and transportation (Boudreau & Dodds 1988).

Though spared the worst of wartime destruction, Bournemouth endured approximately fifty air raids during the Second World War. The toll was sobering: 219 lives lost, 75 buildings destroyed, and thousands of bombs dropped (Edwards 1981). Yet, the town endured and continued to grow into the post-war era.

This section explains that unlike many coastal towns in southern England, Bournemouth did not develop around a fishing harbour or port. Instead, it grew as a resort town due to commercial opportunities and broader economic shifts. For example, the Bournemouth Steam Laundry, which closed in the 1980s but was in operation for over a century, employed hundreds of women to iron, press and fold everything from small garments to large items of

linen (Perrin 2002). However, industrial activities like gasworks and brickworks were kept outside the main town, a trend that continues today with key infrastructure – such as universities, shopping centres, and industrial estates – located in surrounding areas like Townsend and West Howe. Although many Bournemouth residents found work in nearby industrial hubs like Christchurch, regional planning policies limited office development in the town itself. Now part of a large coastal conurbation, Bournemouth has maintained a largely non-industrial character at its core.

West Howe – a short history

While there are limited writings about the working-class history of Bournemouth, there are two sources, produced by the West Howe History Group (1982; 1983) which tell the story of one of Bournemouth's most industrial and working-class areas, which still faces massive issues of poverty and deprivation. *West Howe Proper* (1982) and *West Howe Too* (1983) utilise local knowledge and interviews to tell the story of this working-class area of Bournemouth.

In the early 20th century, West Howe and the surrounding Kinson district were defined largely by their local industries, which provided employment for much of the community. By the time of the First World War, Elliott's Pottery had become the dominant employer in Kinson, engaging between 40 and 50 men and boys in the production of bricks and pottery (West Howe History Group 1982). Alongside it, Burden's Brickyard, W. Flowers Sawmill, W. White Haulage, and several small farms and smallholdings, such as those owned by Edwards and Penny, formed the backbone of the local economy in the pre-war years (West Howe History Group 1983).

This industrial landscape was closely tied to the community's identity. Far from being distant from 'culture', the people of West Howe actively participated in shaping and preserving their own sense of history and belonging. The West Howe History Group emerged from the Community Arts movement, a national shift that challenged the idea that culture belonged solely to educated elites or urban institutions. The group asserted proudly that local people had their own stories, heritage, and value: "We grew out of the nationwide movement in

Community Arts which challenged the outdated belief that culture is the property of a highly educated minority [...]” (West Howe History Group 1982: 5).

Post-World War II, West Howe underwent a period of rapid industrial expansion. From the 1950s onwards, several factories and manufacturing firms were established, many located along Wallisdown Road, often referred to by locals as “the Drove.” Businesses like Flight Refuelling, Drakes Shopfitters, Meggitt Engineers, and Moores Engineering became prominent employers, transforming the district from a semi-rural community into a key industrial zone in Bournemouth (Boudreau & Dodds 1988). Though most of these companies no longer exist, they played a significant role in shaping mid-20th century working life in West Howe.

Today, West Howe stands as a testament to Bournemouth’s working-class heritage, with a community spirit grounded in shared labour and mutual support. The memories and contributions of its residents, as captured by the West Howe History Group, preserve an important chapter of Dorset’s social history – one defined not by wealth or elite culture, but by local knowledge, industrial skill, and communal resilience.

Poole – a short history

Poole, the adjacent town to Bournemouth, boasts a more *traditionally* working-class history.

Human activity in the Poole area dates to at least the Iron Age. The Poole Logboat, a 10-meter-long vessel dated to around 295 BC, was discovered in the harbour, indicating early maritime activity. During the Roman conquest of Britain in the 1st century AD, Poole Harbour served as a strategic landing site. The Romans established a settlement at Hamworthy, now part of Poole, which functioned as a supply base for their operations (Guttridge 2004; Cullingford 1988).

The Elizabethan era saw Poole gain further autonomy when Queen Elizabeth I granted the town the status of a county corporate in 1568, distinguishing it from the rest of Dorset. During the Georgian period, Poole flourished as a port for the wool trade, and the town’s architecture from this era, including Georgian mansions, remains a testament to its prosperity

(Guttridge 2004). The town's working-class roots trace back to its origins as a fishing port. In the 16th century, Poole established successful commerce with the North American colonies, including the important fisheries of Newfoundland. Trade with Newfoundland grew steadily to meet the demand for fish from the Catholic countries of Europe (Guttridge 2004).

The Industrial Revolution brought significant changes to Poole's working-class landscape. The town grew rapidly as urbanisation took place, becoming an area of mercantile prosperity and overcrowded poverty. At the turn of the 19th century, nine out of ten workers were engaged in harbour activities (Guttridge 2004), but as the century progressed, ships became too large for the shallow harbour, and the port lost business to the deep-water ports at Liverpool, Southampton, and Plymouth. Despite the decline of the port, Poole's working-class community still found employment in shipbuilding and manufacturing. The town became known for its shipyards and factories, providing jobs for residents.

Also, the history of the Poole potteries is deeply intertwined with the lives of the working-class. Established in the late 19th century, Poole Pottery began as Carter & Co. in 1873, later evolving into the more widely recognised name during the early 20th century (Hawkins 1980). The pottery gained fame for its brightly coloured, hand-painted earthenware and innovative Art Deco designs, but behind the aesthetic achievements lay the labour of skilled, often underappreciated working-class men and women. These workers – many of them residents without formal education – played a pivotal role in shaping the company's success through generations of craftsmanship, despite often receiving meagre wages and enduring difficult conditions in hot, dusty workshops (Hawkins 1980).

Women were particularly vital to the artistic output of Poole Pottery. In the mid-20th century, the company was known for employing young women as decorators, who would hand-paint intricate patterns under the direction of a few central designers. While the names of those designers are remembered in art history, the decorators themselves were rarely credited, though their skill brought life to every finished piece. Though the work was repetitive and paid modestly, it provided economic independence and a strong sense of community among the workers. The potteries closed in 2006, after well-over 100 years in operation, resulting in over 100 job losses (Slade 2017). It came into new ownership, with a more limited number of

employees, in 2007, but shut down, again in 2017, ending a 144-year history of pottery in Poole (Barber 2017).

Guttridge's (2004: 81) *Poole: A History and Celebration* uses quotes from local residents, to display the harsh realities of poverty and desperation suffered by Poole residents in the early 20th century. This quote displays the precarity of life for families, in Poole, at this time:

“Tuson the pawnbroker provided a weekly lifeline for some of the poverty-stricken families. Mrs Saunders recalled: ‘Every Monday I used to take my clothes and my husband’s and the children’s to Tuson in the High Street. By the weekend we had some money so we would go and get them back ready for church and Sunday school. Then back they would go again on Monday.’”

During World War II, Poole's strategic location made it a target for bombing raids. The town was raided about fifty times; 219 persons were killed; 75 premises were destroyed, and others were so severely damaged that they had to be demolished. In all, 2,271 bombs were dropped there (Beamish, Bennett & Hillier 1980). In the post-war period, Poole's economy diversified, and the town began to develop as a tourist destination, capitalising on its natural beauty and coastal attractions. However, it still maintained its industry, still having as many as 400 factories in 1959 (Guttridge 2004).

Today, Poole's working-class communities continue to contribute to the town's economy, particularly in sectors such as manufacturing, retail, and services. The town's industrial estates, including the Nuffield Industrial Estate and Mannings Heath, remain hubs of employment for local residents. While the town has evolved, the legacy of its working-class history remains evident in its communities and their ongoing contributions to Poole's economy and culture (Sydenham 2000).

Conclusion – biography of place

Bournemouth and Poole, though geographically intertwined on the south coast of England, carry distinct but overlapping biographical identities shaped by class, economy, and representation. Poole's industrial past as a major maritime and manufacturing hub contrasts sharply with the affluence of Sandbanks (in Bournemouth), now one of the most expensive places to live in the UK (ONS 2023). Bournemouth, by contrast, developed in the Victorian era as a genteel seaside resort, attracting health tourism and middle-class retirees (Walton 2000). These histories remain legible in the urban landscape.

The uneven biographies of Bournemouth and Poole have been further intensified by contemporary social policy, particularly under austerity. Following the 2008 financial crisis, much like the rest of Britain, both towns saw reductions in local authority budgets, cuts to social services, and pressure on housing, all of which disproportionately affected working-class and marginalised residents. Hastings et al. (2015) highlight how austerity has spatial effects, with poorer urban areas facing the sharpest reductions in funding, contributing to place-based disadvantage – or 'nested deprivation'. In Bournemouth, the seaside town identity has increasingly masked deeper problems: high levels of private rental insecurity, a growing reliance on Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), and visible homelessness (Smith 2023). Poole, too, has faced rising demand for temporary accommodation, with local authorities struggling to house residents amid soaring rents and a shrinking social housing stock (Shelter 2019). Media portrayals often feed into these structural inequalities: Boscombe, for instance, has been labelled the 'drugs capital of the south' in national tabloids (Sanders 2022; Matthews 2024), reinforcing the kind of spatial stigma that Wacquant (2007b) argues helps justify policy neglect and public indifference. Yet, such accounts obscure the rich social ties and community resilience found in many of these areas. The biography of Bournemouth and Poole, then, is one shaped not just by economic shifts or municipal rebranding, but by the lived experiences of inequality, policy, and resistance that accumulate in particular streets, estates, and communities – in areas of nested deprivation.

The evolving biography of Bournemouth and Poole is also shaped by patterns of migration, demographic change, and competing narratives of belonging. Bournemouth has seen a steady growth in migrant and refugee populations over the last two decades, with EU migration after 2004 playing a significant role in shaping its local labour market – particularly in sectors like care, hospitality, and cleaning (McCollum and Findlay 2015). The town is now home to one of the South West’s largest Polish communities, while Poole has seen an increase in refugee dispersals and asylum-seeking families, supported in part by Home Office schemes such as the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme (Dorset Council 2025). These shifts have challenged long-standing notions of local identity, particularly in areas already facing economic stress. Guma and Jones (2019) note that in coastal and semi-rural towns, anxieties around migration often intersect with broader feelings of abandonment and place-based decline – sentiments which were strongly reflected in Bournemouth and Poole’s majority Leave votes in the 2016 Brexit referendum. Yet, while mainstream narratives often frame these towns as inward-looking or culturally static, there is also evidence of vibrant grassroots responses to diversity. Local charities such as Bournemouth's ICN (International Care Network) and Poole’s Routes to Roots have played important roles in building intercultural ties, supporting refugees, and challenging stigma (ICN 2025). As Back and Sinha (2018) argue, everyday acts of cohabitation, shared work, and informal solidarity are often overlooked in academic and media portrayals of "left behind" places. In this sense, the biography of Bournemouth and Poole must also account for the quieter, complex ways that newcomers and long-established communities negotiate belonging, sometimes in tension but often through practical acts of coexistence and care.

Efforts to rebrand Bournemouth and Poole as desirable lifestyle destinations – capitalising on their universities, coastal location, creative industries, and leisure economies – have played a major role in reshaping their urban biographies. Bournemouth, in particular, has sought to position itself as a digital hub and university town, with its local authority promoting “Smart Place” as a brand aimed at attracting tech start-ups, students, and investment (BCP Council 2020). Meanwhile, Poole’s waterfront regeneration projects, such as the Twin Sails Bridge development, have aimed to reposition the area as a centre for marine technology and luxury housing (BCP Council 2025). These place-branding strategies align with what Peck and Tickell (2002) describe as “neoliberal urbanism,” where cities compete for capital through

cultural capital and visual spectacle, often at the expense of existing working-class communities. In both towns, this dynamic is visible in the rise of upscale apartment blocks, Airbnb conversions, and the growing unaffordability of coastal property – a phenomenon documented in coastal towns across the UK (Fiorentino, Sielker and Tomaney 2023). The biography of Bournemouth and Poole, then, must attend to these contradictions – how seaside nostalgia, aspirational branding, and economic development collide with lived realities of precarity, housing exclusion, and displacement.

I will next extend this biography of place through developing themes from the primary data collected during my study.

4.1.3 Themes related to place

Homelessness and addiction

Homelessness is a very visible feature of Bournemouth and Poole, particularly in the centre of both towns – with the YMCA (2023) reporting that there are 72 rough-sleepers in the BCP area. These notes, from a walking interview with a homeless man, displays the issue:

Walking interview with Shaun (23/10/23): “Shaun took me down a short side street leading to Churchill Gardens – which Shaun told me is known as ‘Dogshit Park’ locally. It’s the school half-term, so there were children playing with their parents looking on. However, these people [the parents and children] were outnumbered by the people who were drinking cans of cider and seemed very likely to be on drugs. There were two men and one woman sat on a bench right in the middle of the park – Shaun said hi to them and they said hi back. The woman was very clearly on drugs, and her face seemed contorted when she replied, like she was having to use a lot of force to stretch her mouth open to respond to Shaun.”

The thing that hit me, in that moment, was that this woman was so clearly on drugs in the morning while 10 metres away kids were playing, and parents were happily watching. This displays just how normalised this sort of behaviour is in the area. Despite it being so visible and normalised, these people are clearly not being given effective support in helping them deal with their obvious issues of addiction. Instead, they are left to cope and continue in public view.

Aaron, another homeless man, offered a raw and critical look at how homelessness and addiction are intertwined in Bournemouth:

Aaron: "Bournemouth is a hole. It's full of homeless people that are all completely dependent on heroin and crack... and, I seem to know every one of them because of where I sit... they all come up to me and chat to me and say hello to me, and they're all really nice people but it's a real shithole... there's not enough, they need to look after people in this town, there's not enough support in this town... people are all getting wasted away and they're not being looked after. There's no communal kitchens, there's no communal toilets and what communal toilets there is aren't supporting anybody. There's just nothing in this town for anybody trying to get them off."

His description captures a sense of hopelessness and abandonment, pointing to a lack of infrastructure and resources for the most vulnerable in society. The absence of basic services – like communal kitchens and toilets – demonstrates a systemic failure to address these issues. Moreover, Aaron's personal story displays a sense of community and leadership which develops within the homeless community. Aaron, a Big Issue seller, is entrusted with an office phone, to communicate with the Big Issue office. Now, he is a respected and precious member within the homeless community, as he will lend people the phone to make personal calls. He is, therefore, fulfilling a need/service that the homeless community would otherwise not have access to.

In the following quote, Mark reflects on the situation in Boscombe and reveals how the issue has grown worse, describing a town increasingly overwhelmed by addiction. He is not sympathetic of the addict community, and imparts blame on them for the plight of the area:

Mark: "The problem with Boscombe is the number of drug addicts that they've brought into the area, the number of prisoners who come out and are dropped into it... I've seen people where they've gone totally insane smoking cannabis, but the point is, when you put that amount of people in a place like that, because what happens is they're drunk all the time, they're a pain in the ass to everyone. Druggies, they bring drugs here, they know where they live... I've seen it where they'll pull in right next to a council building, toot twice, and all the homeless come out to get their drugs... it's getting worse and worse and worse, the amount of drugs and that."

Mark's words express the growing frustration with the influx of individuals struggling with addiction and the lack of solutions to manage it. The rise in drug-related issues seems to have become an overwhelming force in the area. Harry's comment adds to this conversation:

Harry: "There's a lot of drugs round here and everything and you get your idiots but you get that everywhere you go."

His remark reflects a resigned acceptance of the problem, though he acknowledges it's a broader issue, not unique to Bournemouth. Carla's statement further echoes this concern:

Carla: "I see it being here everyday, the troubled people, if you like, things like the drug taking, the dealing outside. Clearly there's people that are struggling with addiction,"

For Carla, the visibility of addiction within the visibly homeless population has become part of the everyday landscape, yet there is no clear solution in sight. It is a problem that is affecting the people in the community but that they do not have the tools to deal with. In 2023, the BBC reported that, “Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) Council has the highest number of rough sleepers outside of London.” (Stephens & Pascoe 2023).

Crime and violence

The increase in crime and violence is another urgent issue that residents express concern about, with knife crime being a primary concern. There is evidence of a downwards trajectory in knife crime, in Bournemouth, since 2020 (48 knife attacks in 2020; 58 knife attacks in 2021; 42 knife attacks in 2022; and 26 knife attacks in 2023), however, the numbers are still alarming (Knight 2024). Chris reflects on the disturbing trend of knife crime in his community:

Chris: "Knife crime and all that around here... like.... been two months, I've known about 3 or 4 people dead... it's getting ridiculous."

The frequency of deaths in such a short period is, understandably, deeply concerning for those who live in the area. Moreover, the ages of those involved in knife attacks is decreasing (Knight 2024), understandably local residents are fearful for the youth. Not only do they highlight crime has increased but the nature of crime has gotten worse. Caroline compares the crime rates she witnessed as a child to the present day, noting the shift:

Caroline: "The trouble is when I was growing up it used to be the odd occasional robbery... now you're talking about knife crimes, things like that, which is, you know, kids haven't got a good setup round here like I had when I was growing up."

Caroline's reflection on her youth emphasises how much the community has changed and how dangerous it has become for younger generations. The rise in violent crimes—particularly knife crimes—are an issue facing working-class communities all over Britain.

Corinne adds to this with her description of the broader climate of crime:

Corinne: "Yeah, I mean there's a lot of robberies going on, there's a lot of people getting beaten up, a lot of muggings, you name it, and it needs to end, and the community needs to stick together."

The list of violent offenses Corinne lists reveals how pervasive these problems are, and her call for the community to come together suggests a desire for solidarity in the face of such issues. Annette connects the rise in crime to an increase in drug usage, noting:

Annette: "There was a lot more petty crime... with the rise of drug usage, it altered here as well."

Here Annette was referring to the changing nature of crime. In her view the increased use of drugs has contributed to a shift in the balance of petty and serious crime with a growth in the latter, including more violent crime.

Community spaces

The evolution of the urban landscape was another prominent theme in the interviews. John, who arrived in the late-60s, remembers Bournemouth in a very different light:

John: "Well, when I first came to Bournemouth in the late-60s, we used to call it God's waiting room... then it started going, I don't know, there are bits that look really good and there are bits that have gone really downhill."

His reflection on the town's transformation suggests a marked division between areas that have flourished and those that have deteriorated and a shift in the demographics. The phrase 'God's waiting room' refers to Bournemouth's higher levels of older people, in the past, who tended to live in the area towards the end of their lives. This characterisation is no longer adequate according to John. This also speaks to the uneven development that has shaped the current socio-economic environment.

Shaun's observation about the lack of services points to a shift in the town's priorities:

Shaun: "Well, when I was younger I noticed there was a lot more services for people."



Figure 6: A former community building in "Dogshit park"

Walking interview with Shaun (23/10/23): "As me and Shaun kept walking, he pointed out a derelict building that used to serve the local community. There is now a newer building in the park, but the old has not been removed or repurposed, it has just been left to rot. In Shaun words, this building is "modern Britain"."

This nostalgia for a time when more was done for the public reveals a sense of loss and concern that essential social services are now being neglected.

Brad's comment about the consolidation of Bournemouth, Poole, and Christchurch into BCP Council, which took place in 2019, adds a layer of complexity to the town's evolution:

Brad: "It's got worse. As soon as Bournemouth and Poole and Christchurch moved together there's a lot more in Bournemouth but there's a lot less in the surrounding areas."

This suggests that while Bournemouth itself may have benefitted from growth, the surrounding areas have suffered due to the shifting of resources and opportunities. This is an issue often faced by seaside towns, as focus and attention are given to the tourist locations.

Caroline's experience with the estate green illustrates how spaces meant for communal enjoyment are often overtaken by antisocial behaviour:

Caroline: "I live on an estate with a green and it's, you can't go on it because you've got all the bikes that are tearing the grass up, you've got glass bottles, they put one bench in and they just use it for meeting up at night and drinking, smoking."

The presence of destruction and disorder on what should be a peaceful public space speaks to a breakdown in communal respect and responsibility. Mark and Carla echo this frustration, describing the town centre as a place where antisocial behaviour runs rampant:

Mark: "You go into the town centre and they're [homeless people] everywhere, they're in the gardens, drunk, being abusive... when somebody comes here they shouldn't have that."

Carla: “So, from the perspective of a local resident, I was brought up here, and the way it’s changed, erm... we’ve noticed, you know, the rise in antisocial behaviour and, you know, since we’ve been here it’s been reduced, the building’s not attacked anymore, because the community have been invited in more. However, there is, you know, the level of it is, you know, things like, you know, vandalism, it wasn’t safe to run in here as a community centre because the level of hostility to youth workers, so, that’s what I’ve noticed to like 10 years ago, there’s been an increase in it, however, in the last years we’ve noticed that it’s been less.”

Caroline, Mark and Carla seem to point to a larger issue of disrespect for public spaces, creating an environment where people feel unsafe and communities’ fracture. However, Carla notes how the community centre she was referring to has started to see a recent decrease in vandalism and anti-social behaviour. This is because the centre, which is run as a charity, makes an effort to include members of the local community.

Work and economic struggles

Several residents highlight the economic struggles that are pervasive in the area, with limited employment opportunities contributing to social discontent. George states:

George: "Bournemouth’s struggling a bit, there’s not enough work, that’s the main problem at the moment."

This lack of job availability adds a layer of frustration for residents, who feel that the local economy is not providing sufficient opportunities for its people. The latest ONS (2024) statistics display an unemployment rate of 3.3%, across Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch.

Additionally, 3.5% of residents are claiming unemployment related benefits, and 19.7% are economically inactive (these figures are for people over the age of 16). Aaron expands on this frustration, claiming that there is a severe lack of support for those in need:

Aaron: "There's no support for anybody in this town... the actual foundation support is not here for people in this town."

His words suggest a systemic failure to provide both economic opportunities and social services, further exacerbating the issues faced by many residents. Brad adds to this theme, commenting on the imbalance of development between Bournemouth and its surrounding areas:

Brad: "There's a lot more in Bournemouth but a lot less in the surrounding areas."

Brad's concern that the centre of Bournemouth receives considerably more funding than other more deprived areas of BCP is supported by Public Health Dorset (2023), suggesting that the council are pursuing a policy of funding tourist hotspots in the hopes of boosting the local economy, at the expense of local residents outside of that small area. This economic divide highlights how resources are not distributed evenly, leading to an unequal development trajectory that leaves certain parts of the town struggling, suggesting the prevalence of nested deprivation.

Completing the biography of place

The themes represented through the quotes above paint a picture of a community facing significant challenges, with homelessness, addiction, crime, and economic struggles at the forefront of local concerns. While there are calls for development and investment to rejuvenate

the town, many residents emphasise the need for a balanced approach that addresses the underlying social issues. From the impact of drug use and crime to the shifting demographics and the erosion of community spaces, these discussions reflect a complex interplay of factors that shape the present and future of their local areas. Ultimately, the key to improving the town's conditions may lie in finding solutions that promote both economic growth and social responsibility.

The focus groups discussed the local area too. This next exchange, from the focus group held with four homeless men, displays a frustration with the lack of attention given to people like them, in areas associated with poverty and crime, as the local council focuses its attention on tourism:

Researcher: "How have things changed around here?"

Frank: "Worse, worse.... Too many drugs, too many stabbings..."

Kyle: "I've lived in this town 10-11 years, I've seen the town deteriorate, you know what I mean? "

Frank: "The rents going up on the businesses and everything else, we've just lost the Wilkos. The nearest Wilkos to us now is in Bournemouth. Our town's getting absolutely, everything's getting worse. They put more into town in Bournemouth that they do in Boscombe... Boscombe used to be millionaires and everything else, now, it's just run by the drugs, that's it. It's got worse."

Tommy: "Every town I can think of's got worse. With Bournemouth its notorious for violence at night, it's not just Boscombe."

Kyle: "People are scared to go out 'int they, before they'd go out to the pub or whatever."

Tommy: "And it's too expensive."

Frank: "Exactly."

Researcher: "What could the council actually do to improve it?"

Frank: "Council's not gonna do nothin', mate. The council's just gone bankrupt..."

Researcher: "What if they had the money?"

Frank: "They don't put money in Boscombe, they put it all in Bournemouth, they don't put it anywhere else, Bournemouth's the main part... we had to fight for Christmas decorations to be put up this year."

Tommy: "The tree isn't very nice though is it."

Frank: "The trees horrendous, compared to Bournemouth."

Tommy: "Compared to what Bournemouth's got."

Frank: “They got winter wonderland, Boscombe they’ve been fucked, they think ‘fuck Boscombe’ and that we’re scum, because it’s full of drugs... they care more about Bournemouth than they do any other areas.”

I found it surprising finding that a group of homeless men would feel frustrated by the lack of Christmas decorations in their local area, in comparison to the decorations in the town centre. It highlights the desire for a nice aesthetic, which provides a sense of pride and care for one’s community. More fundamentally, it also demonstrates the strength of feeling around inequitable resourcing and prioritisation across and within localities. Overall, the findings in this section demonstrate strong understanding of issues that arise in the local community and a desire for them to be fixed.

Moreover, while the accounts above draw on participants’ direct experiences of homelessness, poverty and exclusion, they also reflect the circulation of wider narratives about place. Descriptions of Boscombe, in particular, echo dominant public, political and media representations of marginalised urban and coastal areas. These narratives do not emerge in isolation but are shaped by repeated external portrayals of decline, disorder and social failure. This can be understood through the concept of territorial stigma, whereby places themselves become socially tainted and devalued, and residents internalise and reproduce these stigmatised identities when narrating their own lives (Wacquant, 2007b; 2008).

Importantly, territorial stigma does not imply that participants’ accounts are inaccurate, exaggerated, or lacking in experiential grounding. Rather, it highlights how structural inequalities become symbolically condensed into place-based reputations, shaping how individuals understand decline, blame and neglect. As Wacquant (2008) argues, territorial stigma operates as a form of symbolic power, attaching moral judgement to place and obscuring the structural forces that produce marginalisation. In this sense, participants are not only describing lived experience, but also articulating what they have heard, seen and absorbed about their local area through repeated comparisons with more valued spaces, particularly Bournemouth town centre.

Such narratives reveal how symbolic hierarchies between places are reproduced, reinforcing feelings of abandonment and marginalisation even in the absence of direct

comparison or immediate experience. As Tyler and Slater (2018) demonstrate, stigmatised groups frequently draw on dominant discourses when making sense of their social position, reproducing narratives that individualise or moralise inequality while limiting the articulation of structural critique. Similarly, Slater (2018) shows how territorially stigmatised places become shorthand for social problems, shifting attention away from political and economic responsibility and towards place-based blame. Within this context, participants' emphasis on neglect, reputational damage and unequal resourcing reflects not only material deprivation but also the powerful symbolic effects of living within a stigmatised locality.

4.2 The welfare state

Corinne: "I mean I've been doing little bits here and there to help me get through because, as you know, when you're up here and you've got no money, you're stuck you've got no money, you can't go nowhere, it's isolating. Very isolating."

Corinne's experience of poverty is a good summation of the data that will be shared and described throughout the rest of this thesis. The people interviewed were: mostly determined to work but struggle to find secure/stable employment; isolated socially, leading to an isolation from politics and culture; struggling to maintain a good mental health, due to the isolation and lack of financial security; and, lacking in a sense of purpose and identity. Corinne's quote *is* the lived experience of poverty many people are experiencing.

4.2.1 Universal Credit

UC was first piloted in 2013, then rolled out nationally in 2015. However, the DWP are still in the process of transferring all recipients onto the new system. Brewer, Browne and Jin (2012) performed an analysis on the likely outcomes of UC, before it was piloted. They found that for some people UC would be beneficial, such as couples with children – the nuclear family.

However, single-adult families looked set to lose out. In the time since, more studies have been able to study the impacts of UC, to see if these predictions were true.

UC symbolises a continuation of the transfer from welfarism to workfarism. Instead of adopting the traditional ideals of the welfare state – a safety net approach – UC adopts an approach which emphasises getting people back into employment and not reliant on the state. However, for the participants in this research, the change to workfarism coincides with living in an era where non-precarious work is increasingly difficult to come by:

Becky: “Thing is with agency work you have large chunks of time off like where you’re not working and it’s like... you’re chasing these agencies up like what else can I do?”

Agencies are increasing in presence in the organisation and delivery of the welfare state. But, while they are able to provide an affective workforce for certain industries, they do not solve the issues that precarious employment has on the lived experience of people utilising them. Instead, they contribute to a system of surveillance around labour market participation but without necessarily improving the quality and extent of labour market opportunities available.

Like Becky, Simon is also on UC and attempting to find full-time work. However, he already has two part-time jobs, both of which add great value to his community:

Simon: “Well I work 17-and-a-half hours a week, at the moment. Problem is because the jobs that I do makes it very difficult to find other jobs in-between. Cos I start, I’m a lollipop man, so I start like in the morning and do an hour, then I’ve got a break, until I start again at 3, so I’ve got all day in between, but, I also work in a school as a dinner lady, yeah, honorary dinner lady, so that takes up an hour-and-a-half, so there’s nothing in between that I can do... yeah”

While Simon would love to find full-time and stable work, it should be noted that *someone* needs to do the jobs he is currently doing. They are important jobs that help the functioning of

the local community at specific times of the day and are also part of a flexible labour market. But, instead of being praised for these important roles, Simon feels both belittled and undervalued by his work coaches, who place pressure on him to find alternative/more work. In this respect, the welfare system and labour market are hard to reconcile and people like Simon are caught in a contradictory position.

UC has been designed to scrutinise people's desire to work. Therefore, people in receipt of UC face sanctions if they do not provide evidence that they are actively seeking employment. They must fill out online forms describing each job they apply for and are expected to spend 35 hours per week applying for jobs.

It is then at the discretion of their appointed DWP officer to decide if they should face sanctions for not trying hard enough to find employment (Cheetham, et al. 2019). Cain's (2016: 488) research on lone and low-paid parents concluded that "Universal Credit demonstrates a clash between market-liberal economic ideals of labour flexibility, and conservative valorisations of the good mother and (married/heteronormative) family [...]." This coincides with earlier depictions and descriptions of neoliberalism in relation to precarity. Neoliberalism requires a flexible labour market, which itself creates precarity. Miller and Bennet (2017: 178) support this, arguing that proponents of UC have failed by overlooking the structural issues that create unemployment and precarity: "[...] people cannot change the labour market as individuals; all they can do is to try and change their position within it." Therefore, with unemployed or low-paid parents forced by threats of sanctions into precarious work, they are less able to spend quality time with their children, which is problematic according to traditional conservative ideologies.

Wood (2024) explores the experiences of young parents within the UC framework, identifying systemic inadequacies in support and negative interactions with DWP staff. The study reveals that young parents face compounded challenges, including stigmatisation and a lack of understanding from welfare providers, necessitating a re-evaluation of policies to better support this demographic.

The ethical dilemmas surrounding UC are further complicated by Machin's (2017) critique of the two-child limit on welfare benefits. This policy reflects a broader ideological shift towards individual responsibility, stigmatising families based on perceived deservingness.

Such frameworks not only affect eligibility but also impose moral judgments on claimants, further entrenching inequalities within the welfare system.

Emily, a parent of six, has experienced unfair and harsh sanctions:

Emily: “Hard... because, I, erm, last, no, two weeks ago, I asked to change my number and that said my work coach was going to ring me back. No one rung me back so they sanctioned me payment and that wasn't our fault... whereas I've asked my work coach to ring me back, I've done journal messages, but yeah it wasn't taking any of that into account until they checked what I said was correct, then they decided to reinstate my payment, but that was hard because that was a few days late and a bit of a worry but... It is difficult to be on Universal Credit.”

Emily and her partner have children and, until some recent bad luck, had not been reliant on UC. Navigating the system was stressful and both her and her partner skipped meals due to the unfair sanctions she described.

This issue affecting Emily resulted from the decision of just one individual, employed by the DWP, to decide on sanctions. The individual work coaches who work at the JobCentres are a source of frustration and control for many:

Simon: “Oh, a nightmare, because my rents just gone up and I've had to jump through hoops to get them to actually acknowledge that my rent has gone up. I've had to get so many bits of paperwork, from my landlord, proof that my rents gone up and blah blah blah, I've had to get a gas certificate to say that and all sorts, just to prove that I am not just living there, and my rent has gone up – so yeah it's very difficult.”

Added to the stress of balancing his low-paying multiple part-time jobs, Simon recently had his rent go up. Rather than a simple bank statement or email to prove his rent had increased,

the agent required that Simon go through a stressful and, ultimately, pointless process of finding paperwork so that he could afford his rent.

Like Emily, Becky has been penalised for mistakes that were not her own:

Becky: “Absolute rubbish. Absolute rubbish because you’re penalised for... how can I put it... for their mistakes... because, I get carers allowance to go out and look after my friend, and I applied it in August and they claimed that I was paying too much and now I’m being penalised for it when I wasn’t even aware of it and I was just like... ‘okay, thank you very much’...”

Researcher: “How long have you been on any sort of welfare?”

Becky: “Universal Credit... since about 2015. Jobseekers before that”

Researcher: “So your whole adult life you’ve been on some sort of support. Have you found that’s worsened?”

Becky: “Yes. Because, it’s just... you feel like the bad person, in a way... because... you’re trying to find work and you’re sat in this like room with other people and you’re like ‘hang on, I’ve been trying to look’ and you make me feel like I’m not actually doing what I’m meant to be doing and what we agreed upon and, yeah, it just makes you feel like the bad guy”

Researcher: “Is it the people you speak to? Do you have to go into the office?”

Becky: “I... because of my anxiety I can’t go in there physically myself... and, they’ve had to... I’ve said this so many times, particularly to my work-coach, I can’t, because of my anxiety, I have good and bad days, I can’t go in”

Researcher: “Are they sympathetic towards your anxiety?”

Becky: “No, they don’t care at all.”

This experience of being judged negatively is soul-destroying. UC is based on a distrust of the people utilising it. Becky was not treated like an individual with circumstances that require support and empathy, but as just another claimant who should be pressured into whatever work regardless of the affect it might have on her mental health. This was an opinion shared by Caroline and Brad:

Caroline: “I think it stresses people, it’s not the easiest of systems.”

Brad: “Unless you’ve got a drink problem there’s nothing that the council can do for you, they just expect you to go to work and earn your own living.”

Cheetham et al. (2019) corroborate these findings with qualitative insights from claimants in North East England, highlighting how UC has led to severe financial hardships and increased feelings of shame and isolation. The authors argue that UC’s design fails to meet the needs of vulnerable populations, exacerbating poverty and mental health issues rather than alleviating them. Moreover, Wickham et al. (2020) assess the psychological consequences of UC implementation, finding a significant increase in psychological distress among unemployed individuals. The study concludes that UC not only affects financial stability but also poses

serious threats to mental health, urging for health impact assessments in future welfare evaluations.

The reliance on automated systems within UC is in some ways responsible for how it has created mental health issues. Meers (2020) discusses the “Non-Banking Day Salary Shift” problem, where automated income assessments result in erratic UC payments, complicating financial stability for claimants. The study finds that automation, while intended to streamline processes, has created irrational outcomes that neglect the complexities of claimants’ lives, thereby exacerbating their financial uncertainties.

This quote from Sam goes further:

Sam: “Corrupt... very corrupt... one minute they can be all... ‘yeah okay this is all good’ and the next minute it’s ‘nah, we’re not gonna accept that in the system’... it’s not equal, it’s their actual computers, and how they’re told to run it, they work off a script. And, at one point, I had to go the JobCentre and explain to them the situation I was in and they said that me looking for a job with a three-year-old child at the time and being a full-time dad in a family assessment centre was not a viable reason for their system... so, to an extent they’re a scam... they’re aliens, mate.”

The interactions participants had with the UC system did not feel like those with *real* people. In particular, the implementation of the system does not allow space for human compassion and sensibility. Sam’s situation was clearly one deserving of support, but he was denied due to parameters that did not tick the right box according to a bureaucratic system that has become increasingly inflexible through its growing digitisation.

Andrews (2023) posits that UC sanctions function as a form of punishment rather than mere administrative penalties. Drawing on theories of punishment from Foucault, Durkheim, and Feinberg, Andrews argues that UC sanctions impose a normative standard of behaviour on claimants, leading to significant behavioural changes and stigmatisation. This perspective aligns with Cain’s (2016) examination of the “responsibilisation” of lone and low-paid parents, suggesting that UC’s rigid job-search requirements disproportionately penalise those unable to

meet these expectations, particularly single mothers. Both studies highlight a decline in public sympathy for welfare claimants, legitimising harsher sanctioning practices justified by moralistic discourse.

The punitive framework is further supported by findings from Griffiths and Cain (2022), who discuss the mental health implications of UC deductions on claimants. They reveal that the lack of awareness about rights related to deductions exacerbates financial instability, leading to increased stress and strained familial relationships. Such insights underscore the coercive nature of UC, as claimants navigate a system that resembles punitive measures seen in criminal justice rather than supportive welfare.

Unsurprisingly, the system caused frustration meaning that it would be easy to become frustrated with the agents:

Corinne: “Talk to them like crap mate they ain’t gonna do nothing for you, nothing at all, your Ps and your Qs, your manners, they get you so much further than when you’re actually sitting there shouting at them. But the experience on universal credit is absolutely, it’s wrong. The experience that I’ve had, I’ve asked them to change my money over to fortnightly, that still hasn’t been done, the lack of communication between the council and everything else that’s a load of crap as well, excuse my language people, ha ha ha.”

Corinne’s mention of manners and the necessity for them is indicative of the power dynamics and control that the state has over the lives of people on UC. Work coaches have the power to literally remove the weak safety net provided by UC.

Moreover, not only did participants report that the job agents were lacking in compassion and empathy, but they also emphasised they are often hard to get the opportunity to speak to in the first place:

Tanya: “So, awful, it’s an awful system. Because you can’t get through to anybody in an emergency, you know, erm, you can pop a message on your work-coach thing but you’ll be lucky if you get it back, they’re not, they don’t have, they’re not trained enough and they don’t have the information to-hand in order to help people or guide people in the right direction.”

Brendan has had similar experiences:

Brendan: “Erm...difficult... me, personally, if I phone up the call centre these days you don’t get anywhere with anyone... takes a good 10 minutes to get through to someone on the phone and then they hang up straight away, first excuse they get they hang up on me, it’s not very good.”

Millar and Bennett (2017) provide a critical examination of UC’s design, arguing that its emphasis on conditionality undermines the very independence it purports to promote. They identify a paradox wherein efforts to foster self-sufficiency simultaneously impose greater state control over claimants. The authors advocate for a comprehensive review of welfare policies to realign them with the realities faced by low-income individuals. Newman’s (2023) paper delves into the ontological assumptions underlying UC reforms, revealing a disjunction between different policy models—life-course, rationalist, and responsibility. The paper argues that these conflicting assumptions complicate the effectiveness of welfare policies, perpetuating injustices by holding individuals morally accountable while neglecting structural influences on their behaviour. The incoherence of these models underscores the need for more nuanced policy frameworks.

Meers (2022) critiques the UK government’s £20 uplift to UC during the pandemic, which excluded recipients of legacy benefits. This decision led to a two-tier system, raising concerns of indirect discrimination, particularly against disabled individuals who are disproportionately represented among legacy benefit claimants. The court’s acceptance of the government’s justification for prioritizing new claimants highlights a troubling lack of

recognition for the shared hardships faced by all claimants. Meers argues that the rationale provided fails to consider the essential similarities in the needs of claimants, thereby questioning the ethical foundations of such discriminatory practices. Williams, Bell, Garratt and Price's (2022) findings support this argument. Their research reveals that claiming UC correlates with increased housing insecurity compared to legacy benefits, particularly for vulnerable populations.

Ultimately, the policy has failed in its desired outcome to minimise unemployment (Wickham et al. 2020). What it has achieved, is increased mental health issues (Cheetham et al. 2019), and an increased pressure and stigma attached to single-parents, particularly single-mothers. Moreover, while UC was the focus/label utilised for finding participants for this research, it is not the only benefit where the claiming process causes stress and punitive measures. Maria's experience of PIP shares similar themes:

Maria: "It's a living big-fucking-nightmare... It's a living nightmare.. I had two people when I first applied for PIP, two people coming round to give a one-to-one assessment. These two people were *laughs*, it just makes me laugh, because these two people were... the rules are a bit of a joke, the rules are a bit of a joke... because, I don't get full pip, even though I've had this since I was 17 and I'm now 54, I don't get full pip because I can walk 50 yards some days, I can walk the length of three buses, it's a joke because it doesn't really apply to some things if they, if you don't hit the exact targets that they... dealing with them is really difficult, it is really difficult because I get refused first-of-all, I cried, I cried and cried and cried and cried, because... anyway I went through it again and they said 'yes' the next time... but, it's erm...arbitrary, I say the judging is really arbitrary... one woman let me through and I was allowed to keep it, but the next woman was a bit of a bulldog and cut £250 off my monthly benefit, just on a phone call. It is crazy."

The welfare state should be in place to act as a safety net for people who are vulnerable or who become vulnerable through unfortunate circumstances. It should be based on compassion and not in the right-wing ideas of an 'underclass' of workshy individuals and families that have

been sociologically proven to not exist (*see* Shildrick, MacDonald, Webster & Garthwaite 2012).

4.3 Food poverty and foodbanks

Carla: “I remember one time I went to Asda and I literally lost the £10 that I walked in with to get us food and I was like shit, I went to pay and I’ve dropped the money and I was just like ‘for God’s sake’, so I had to take it all back and it was just, you know, I’ve been in the supermarket and had like £3.38 on me and trying to make a meal, those sorts of times you know.”

Food poverty and food insecurity have emerged as major problems in the UK, since 2010. Richards-Gray (2023) researched the effects of the five-week waiting time for UC and found that the long wait exacerbates poverty. Conservative politicians hoped that this cost-cutting austerity measure would nudge people into employment more quickly. However, it has failed to address the structural issue that is a lack of non-precarious jobs and, even something as seemingly small (and essential to many Britons, regardless of class) as a cup of tea, is putting strain on people in positions of poverty and precarity:

Tanya: “Okay, well it all depends on your kettle. So, a 3 kilowatt kettle if you only fill it for a cup of tea that will only cost you 1.28p. Doesn’t sound a lot, but if you make 10 cups of tea a day times that by 7, times that again and then add in your tea bag and your milk and everything else that’s gone up by 13.3% that cup of tea is probably costing you 15p? You know, so it’s a massive impact.”

Tanya’s calculation is impressive and well-thought-out. Her statement that 15p per cup of tea has a ‘massive impact’ would be alien to a lot of people not in positions of poverty. But, it

illustrates how the cost-of-living crisis has affected people to the point where every penny counts.

The following two quotes display this increase in basic living costs:

Jack: “Absolutely, absolutely yeah... the cost of food now, as you know, you can’t even buy a pint of milk these days, it’s ridiculous at times, you can’t budget anything and then you’ve got your rent and that gets topped up every year by landlords. Erm... electric, gas... all the way down to toilet roll now, literally, do you know what I mean. Not long ago you could pick up four toilet rolls for 50 pence, put now it’s like £2-£2.50.”

Caroline: “Erm... yeah so the cost, the cost of shopping the food has gone sky high, gas, electric has doubled...”

Emily, a mother-of-six, has suffered from a punitive welfare state. Her and her partner go hungry so that their children can eat and have clean clothes to wear to school.

Emily: “At the moment we’re having to pay two rents, so we’re, they still haven’t cancelled the old rent so we’re losing £350 a month, so without that it’s quite hard but, we budget it well not enough but what we get we budget well, but I don’t think it’s that good... we get £1000 a month for 8 people and that seems like a lot but that ranges from children from age 11 to one, two adults, the clothes, even clothes are expensive now, but everything we’ve noticed it’s not just groceries and petrol and gas that’s gone up, it’s everything.”

Researcher: “What have you found the most difficult in the last year?”

Emily: “Food shopping, I used to get, I used to easily be able to fill a trolley for £100 now it’s nearly like £200 just to fill a trolley, and then we’re like, me and my partner hardly eat because we’d rather, it sounds bad, we’d rather go without food and get the kids something nice like to wear or something they need, so we go without, but I think that’s the only reason we’re like coping as well as we are.”

O’Connell et al. (2019) investigate food poverty, revealing that between 2005 and 2013, the percentage of families spending below the Food Budget Standard (FBS) rose from 41% to 52%. The study particularly highlights the struggles of lone parents and larger families, indicating that rising food costs coupled with stagnant incomes severely impact their ability to maintain a nutritious diet. The authors argue for a multidimensional understanding of food poverty, emphasizing its implications for health and social participation, and call for policy interventions to address the underlying economic challenges faced by these families.

Knight, O’Connell and Brannen (2018) further illustrate the implications of food poverty on young people’s lives in the UK. Their qualitative study reveals how food insecurity affects not only nutritional intake but also social participation and emotional well-being. The narratives of participants in both this study and the research here demonstrates that food poverty is intertwined with broader structural issues, such as government policies and economic conditions, calling for urgent action to address these challenges.

The emergence, prominence and normalisation of food banks has been one of the most notable phenomena during this long era of austerity. In 2008, there were 29 food banks in Britain and by 2023, there were over 1400 (Trussell Trust 2023). This mass increase displays the immense precarity which has befallen millions of people over those years. Therefore, and unsurprisingly, food banks have been at the centre of much empirical research on austerity and poverty, with households affected by welfare cuts much more likely to utilise food banks (Sosenko, Littlewood & Hennigan 2020).

In this study, Maria stated:

Maria: “I would say food banks have definitely been more-used by ordinary people and I consider using it myself because I can get food bank vouchers and I think well, it’s there, and I don’t like to take all that’s owed to me because I manage quite well but I am thinking about it because butter’s £2.50, it’s mad and I’m sure some people are really struggling.”

90% of food donated to food banks comes from the general public, often via collection bins at the exits of supermarkets (*cited in* Garthwaite 2016). They are meant as an emergency measure, to prevent hunger for families in need. Food bank vouchers are given to those in need via referrals from local institutions – such as councils, schools and doctors surgeries. However, in many communities, food poverty has become normalised:

Simon: “Oh yeah, I live on toast quite a lot, and jam”

Researcher: “Is that the hardest thing you find, the food?”

Simon: “No, I used to do that when I was living in a bed sit anyway so, and growing up it’s always been difficult I’ve never had money so you just adapt, you know, I have a hot meal every now and again or when I’m working then I’ll have a cooked breakfast in the morning then I won’t eat again until the evening, and it’s either a sandwich or something like that, you know, so you always work things out, you know, if you haven’t got it you don’t have it, so luckily my flat mates normally got stuff in so I get a bit of his, so, it works”

Garthwaite’s (2016) *Hunger Pains* presents an ethnographic research project focused solely on foodbanks. Garthwaite blames structural issues, such as the precarious job market as the reason for people having to rely on food banks. She also discusses how food insecurity has consequences for health. In particular, Garthwaite focuses on mental health and the stigma

associated with using a food bank. However, she (ibid.: 134) also highlights the communal nature of food banks, despite the stigma attached to using them, can be beneficial for mental health:

“For people with mental health problems, coming to the foodbank could sometimes be described as being beneficial for them in terms of having someone to talk to. The sense of community that volunteers aimed to foster in the foodbank – tables set up café style, pretty orange pink and white checked tablecloths, plates of biscuits and little crystal bowls of sugar for the tea and coffee – attempted to create a non-judgemental and relaxed atmosphere.”

Garthwaite’s finding on space and community will be discussed further in relation to this study in the chapter on mental health.

Cloke, May, and Williams (2017) reconceptualised food banks as potential event spaces that foster alternative political and ethical possibilities. Through autoethnographic narratives and critical analysis, the authors argued that food banks serve as liminal spaces where volunteers and clients engage in transformative experiences that can reshape their understandings of social justice and responsibility. This interaction can disrupt conventional narratives about poverty, allowing for a collective recognition of the systemic issues contributing to food insecurity. Their findings suggest that food banks have the potential to cultivate progressive ethical practices and encourage political awareness among participants.

They often become spaces for socialising and creating a sense of community. For Darren, his two weekly trips to the foodbank are part of his routine, despite his struggles with mental health which see him rarely leaving his home:

Darren: “Haven’t worked for four years. Can’t work because of my mental health. So, I come down here twice a week for me food, don’t really do much to be honest.”

Empirical research has also revealed how diverse the demographic of food banks users is. Perceptions of food banks focus around unemployment and destitution, but the precarious job market means that this is often not the case. Anyone in casual employment situations can find themselves in need of a food bank (Loopstra, Latorre & McKee 2019). Moreover, research by the Foods Standards Agency (2023) reveals that food bank users often face an intersection of multiple challenges, such as housing instability, disability, and mental health issues. Moreover, one third of food bank users are children (Trussell Trust 2023).

Alongside food banks, there are now over 600 community fridges in the UK (Hubbub 2023). They are similar to food banks, but do not require a referral for access and were not created purely on the basis of tackling hunger. Community fridges were created to reduce waste *as well as* to help aid those suffering from food insecurity – with one-quarter of the world’s population suffering from food insecurity and one-third of all food going to waste (*cited in* Visram & Brown 2020). However, Visram and Brown’s (*ibid.*) research identified a third key function of food fridges in the UK, which, similar to Garthwaite’s research on food banks, found that community fridges function as a community hub, where people can become included in their communities – therefore, community fridges can help to alleviate or tackle social exclusion.

Power, Doherty, Pybus and Pickett (2020) analyse the implications of food bank referral systems in the UK, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. They critique existing eligibility criteria for food aid, suggesting that narrow definitions of vulnerability can exclude many economically disadvantaged individuals. Their findings advocate for significant reforms in social security policies to better support vulnerable populations, moving towards a more sustainable food distribution system.

Bazerghi, McKay, and Dun (2016) conducted a systematic review examining the role of food banks in mitigating food insecurity and meeting clients’ nutritional needs. Their analysis included 14 studies focused on food security, 13 on nutritional intake, and 24 on client needs related to food bank usage. Findings indicated that approximately 50% of food bank clients were food insecure, with significant hunger levels particularly prevalent among families with children. Nutritional assessments revealed that many participants lacked adequate intake of essential food groups, including fruits, vegetables, and proteins. Clients expressed a desire

for more variety in food offerings, particularly culturally appropriate options, and highlighted the need for better access to services and information.

Lambie-Mumford (2013) explored the dual nature of food banks as both immediate relief mechanisms and indicators of broader social failures within the welfare system. Her qualitative study revealed that while food banks effectively address urgent food needs, they simultaneously highlight the inadequacies of government intervention in tackling root causes of poverty. Many food bank users reported feelings of humiliation and stigma, which were somewhat alleviated by the legitimacy conferred by the voucher system. Furthermore, Lambie-Mumford noted the advocacy potential of food banks, suggesting they could leverage collected data to raise awareness and influence policy changes.

Purdam, Garratt, and Esmail (2016) investigated the stigma associated with food bank usage, revealing that many users experience significant embarrassment and shame, which often deters them from seeking help. Their study found that food insecurity is more pervasive than official statistics indicate, affecting diverse populations, including working families. Users employed various coping strategies to navigate economic struggles, often relying on informal support networks. Importantly, food banks provided not only food but also a sense of community, contrasting sharply with users' experiences in other public services.

Charlie: "You don't realise how embarrassing it is [using a foodbank]."

Williams, May, Cloke and Goodwin (2016) examined the political implications of food bank volunteering within the context of austerity and welfare reform. Their ethnographic research highlighted the contradictions faced by volunteers who provide immediate support while critiquing the welfare system that necessitates food banks. Some volunteers evolved into advocates for social justice, while others resisted politicization, illustrating the diverse motivations and perspectives within food banking. The study underscored the potential for food banks to catalyse broader movements for food justice, emphasising the importance of critical engagement with existing welfare structures. However, while this section has emphasised some

literature which provides hope that foodbanks could foster a collectivist community outlook, not all of the participants in this research would agree:

Darren: “I need it for my food, but a lot people I see the same faces in here everyday, getting loads of bags of food. And, some of them are single mothers who I know are getting loads from the benefits system. And it’s like, that food must be going to waste, surely you ain’t eating all that.”

The quote from Darren suggests that the ideology of neoliberal has real influence over the who is deserving and undeserving of welfare support, regardless of whether this is from the charitable or public sector. However, for the most part, participants felt a sense of community in the foodbanks and community fridges. This will be discussed more in the next chapter on mental health.

4.4 Experiencing homelessness

Pleace (2016) argues that a dominant narrative of homelessness, based on individual deficiencies, seeing blame placed on the individual and not on the state, is based on literature from the USA – and the author warns against Europeans falling into the same trap. However, Pleace does not go so far as to place blame entirely at the door of the state and structural factors resulting from poor policy decisions. He argues that doing so dehumanises homeless people by removing their ability to be recognised as having any agency over their own lives.

Many academics in this field now speak of Multiple Exclusion Homelessness (MEH). MEH requires researchers to recognise how homelessness interconnects with other issues, such as drug addiction, involvements in the criminal justice system, and mental health problems. Fitzpatrick, Johnsen and White (2011) tested MEH by looking at who visits non-homelessness related services and homelessness specific services. They found that although rough sleeping was less prevalent in those non-homelessness services, the rates of homelessness were almost

as high, with many users relying on temporary accommodation or sofa surfing, indicating diverse pathways into homelessness.

In later research, Fitzpatrick, Bramley and Johnsen (2013) found that many homeless people left home and experienced substance misuse in their adolescents. The authors argue that they can see a sequential pattern leading to homelessness, with the early factors of substance misuse and parental rejection leading to mental health issues and homelessness. Moreover, the substance misuse is linked to childhood trauma, as it is used as a coping mechanism. Kevin, who is long-term street-homeless, is an example of this:

Kevin walking interview notes (09/11/23): “Kevin has been homeless on-and-off since the age of 14 and finds it so normal that he would struggle to imagine his life any differently.”

Maycock and O’Shaughnessy (2023) explore the intricate relationship between chronic homelessness and substance use disorders. They assert that while many individuals’ experiencing homelessness have substance use disorders, structural factors such as poverty and childhood trauma are significant contributors to both homelessness and substance use. Benjaminsen (2023) elaborates on the relationship between homelessness and welfare systems, noting that the effectiveness of these systems in mitigating homelessness varies significantly based on structural factors. He examines the Nordic countries, where robust welfare frameworks have been undermined by market-oriented housing policies, leading to increased homelessness despite prior successes. In contrast, countries that have adopted Housing First models have seen substantial reductions in homelessness.

The rough-sleeping homeless are arguably the most visible face of Savage’s (2015) defined precariat class, with no shelter whatsoever. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities’ latest ‘Rough sleeping snapshot in England’ (2023) estimates that the number of people sleeping rough in autumn 2023 was 3,898.

One rough-sleeping homeless participants in my research was Kelly, who was heavily pregnant:

Researcher: “It must be really hard being homeless and pregnant.”

Kelly: “I just need lots of sleeping bags for comfort with my bump.”

Kelly had a sense of normality with sleeping rough. She did not feel sorry for herself. Her response is a display of the toughness and strength of people in these conditions. As a healthy man, I could not imagine having to spend endless nights sleeping rough; but, for Kelly, it was just accepted. Moreover, Kelly told me that she could not be housed by the council until she had given birth. This feeds into a complex realist understanding of lived experience. For example, the website for Shelter (2026) clearly states that being pregnant means that councils have a responsibility to provide support – regardless of the length of time a person has been pregnant. In this respect the micro-level agency of Kelly and the local authority can be seen to be interacting within a wider political economy of scarcity and narratives about welfare dependency, in which the outcomes are not fixed but contingent upon these structures. Here, Kelly’s experience is one associated with the failure of the welfare state to inform citizens of their rights, potentially due to the wider structural constraints the local context is situated within. From a complex realist perspective, Kelly’s lived experience can be understood as emerging within nested contexts of deprivation that shape – but do not determine – life chances, meaning that while others who grew up in similar conditions may not experience homelessness, the structural environment nevertheless forms an important backdrop to why Kelly has and why support systems have struggled to prevent it. Bretherton (2017) focuses on gender and urges readers to reconsider gender in homelessness. She argues that women are often part of the hidden homeless, and are, therefore, left out in a lot of research (*see also* Bretherton & Pleace 2023b). The author argues that more research is needed focused on women who are homeless, and that their experiences of, and pathways to, homelessness are under-researched. Women’s homelessness is most likely to be the result of domestic abuse and trauma (Bretherton 2023), but homeless support is often tailored towards men and drug misuse. Bretherton’s findings align with my research, as Kelly was one of only very few street-homeless women I came across and the only one I was able to interview.

Similar to Kelly, Brad showed enormous strength in the face of adversity and normalised his street-homelessness. He thought of himself as fortunate to have found a bike shed to sleep in, which no other homeless people knew about and where the owners did not ever seem to check:

Brad: “In a bike shed... yeah, I found a bike shed where I can just literally turn the lights off, close the doors, lock the doors, everything’s cushty in there.”

While most people would fear the thought of sleeping in a bike shed, Brad has normalised his homelessness to such an extent that he feels lucky to have found it. It is *his* place of solitude and comfort. I asked Brad if I could visit the bike shed, to see how he was living, but he declined. He was, understandably, fearful that other street-homeless individuals would notice us visiting and then take the *accommodation* for themselves.



Figure 7: A spot for “bin diving”

Walking interview with Kevin (09/11/23): “Kevin asked me if I’d ever been ‘bin diving’. I told him no and he walked me to a spot he said was good for it. He opened the bin and had a rummage through but didn’t manage to find anything great on this occasion. However, he did notice a chair that had been thrown out. He told me that it would be gone before long, some homeless person who wasn’t street homeless would soon take it with them.”

An often-overlooked aspect of rough-sleeping homeless is that many of these people have jobs but are still far below the poverty line and being illegally exploited, like Thomas:

Thomas: “I was homeless for like 7 years living in my tent, or sometimes I was staying at building sites because I did some cash-in-hand work, it wasn’t like full-time job but was enough for me to get drugs and booze, to be honest, so yeah, I didn’t really think about future at that point.”

Jakob had a similar experience, after moving to Poole in search of better opportunities:

Walking interview with Jakob (09/11/23): “Jakob only moved to Poole a few months ago. Jakob had moved here with the promise of work and accommodation. However, after not long at all, he was kicked out of his accommodation and had to become street homeless. Jakob sleeps in a tent on a school playground, as he says it is a lot of effort to get in so he knows he is the only homeless person there.

Jakob tells me that he has £2000 in cash, but with no job he is finding it impossible to attain a house, and, without a house, he is finding it impossible to attain a job. It’s a poverty trap: if you have a house then it is much easier to get a job and if you have a job it is much easier to get a house. But, what if you have neither? Jakob lives in fear of having his money stolen and carries a hammer for protection.

Since 2010, there has been a large increase in homelessness (Aldridge 2020), due to factors such as changes to the welfare state (*see* Bramley and Fitzgerald 2017) and global crises which have seen more migrants to the UK, with a large increase in homeless migrants since 2010 also (*see* Consoli 2023). Crisis’ latest ‘homeless monitor’ reports that “Some 282,000 single people, couples and families were judged as homeless or threatened with homelessness by local authorities in 2020/21 [...]” (Watts, Bramley, Pawson, Young, Fitzpatrick &

McMordie 2022). This figure takes into account the ‘hidden’ homeless – for example, people who are sofa-surfing or sleeping in their cars – who are often overlooked (Bramley & Fitzgerald 2017).

For much of British history, homelessness has been seen as an individual deficiency, explained by things like a lack of morality or lack of work ethic. The homeless population were blamed for their own social positions and treated with disgust – referred to with derogatory terms, such as ‘tramps’ and ‘vagabonds’ (O’Sullivan 2023a). However, in the last century, there has been a slow progression, whereby an almost-consensus view among sociologists now is that it is structural factors beyond the control of the individual which should be blamed for causing homelessness. However, beyond academic accounts of homelessness, there is still a strong tendency for people to blame homeless on individual deficiencies, with dominant narratives still focusing on things like addiction and mental illness (Bretherton & Pleace 2023a). These views fail to recognise that improvements to the support offered to homeless people are insufficient. For example, Brendan *chooses* to be street homeless because the supported living he has previously been provided has not catered to his needs. In fact, Brendan reported that sleeping on the streets was safer for him than sleeping in council-provided accommodation:

Researcher: “So, being on the streets is better than some of the places they housed you?”

Brendan: “Yeah, I was getting so much grief from people like you wouldn’t believe.”

However, while it is true that many rough-sleeping homeless people are the most visible faces of homelessness, they only represent a minority of the homeless population. It overlooks many of the hidden homeless, which is often the result of relationship breakdowns or domestic violence, as opposed to drug addiction. Moreover, even those who are homeless and suffering from issues of addiction and mental health will still often have structural issues of inequality and poverty at the root of their cause of homelessness. However, this dominant narrative is a powerful tool for the ruling classes, as it allows for an avoidance of criticism for welfare

policies that have caused increasing levels of homelessness, since 2010 (Bramley & Fitzgerald 2017). For example, Williams, Bell, Garratt & Pryce (2022) found evidence that the transition to UC has led to increased levels of financial insecurity among vulnerable populations, ultimately leading to higher eviction rates and more homelessness.

Bramley and Fitzpatrick's (2018) quantitative research studied different predictive factors of homelessness, to see which factors were most prevalent. They found that childhood poverty was the most significant predictor of homelessness. Another factor that was very significant was teenage experiences of school exclusion and drug use. The researchers argued, based on their findings, that homelessness is driven by structural issues of poverty, and not distributed based on individual deficiencies that are randomly distributed. Moreover, they emphasised a recognition of protective factors that stop people becoming homeless, like stable relationships and living arrangements.

O'Sullivan (2023b) argues that crime and homelessness are naturally interconnected, as laws often criminalise survival on the streets, such as anti-begging laws. Moreover, homeless people are more likely to be victims of crime. The author argues that the inherent relationship between crime and homelessness creates an 'institutional circuit' of shelters, prisons, and psychiatric facilities – he also notes that prisons are playing more and more of a role in this circuit as the welfare state declines.

Chris: "Sometimes you get robbed by people, they rob your stuff, they rob your clothes... sometimes the council, if you leave your stuff in a doorway they take it and then it takes time to get new stuff somewhere... it's hard..."

Kevin illuminates this issue more, by using the analogy of a prison':

Walking interview with Kevin (09/11/23): "We talked about homelessness and Kevin told me it is kind of like prison. He said it is like prison because you are trapped being homeless and there is no way out of it. Also, there are lots of local charities providing

food and supplies, so you are somewhat ‘looked after’, like in prison. However, the main similarity to prison, and the reason it came into conversation in the first place, was the fact you had to be strong to survive and not be taken advantage of. Kevin was filled with pride and a sense of status that he was not a ‘weak person’.

Like in prison, the homeless population must be savvy and *strong*, in order to survive and not be taken advantage of. Kevin felt that being street-homeless was completely normal for him, and he took status and enjoyment from his community role:

Walking interview with Kevin (09/11/23): “He was proud that he always knew how to ‘handle himself’ and viewed himself as something of a local enforcer amongst the homeless population. I asked about how some homeless people told me they had a great sense of community with their fellow homeless people and others I spoke to said the opposite and that they were scared of their fellow homeless people. Kevin told me that it was a case of this: people would prey on the weak, so if you couldn’t defend yourself or stand up for yourself you were in trouble.”

Summary

The findings on experiencing homelessness reveal the complexity of the issue, with the more visible rough-sleeping homeless attracting the most attention. Moreover, dominant narratives continue to place responsibility on individuals, framing homelessness as the result of personal failings. These feelings are, then, often internalised and normalised. However, this thesis supports a view that homelessness tends to stem from structural issues of poverty and inequality, whereby the needs of the homeless go unmet – through inadequate welfare provisions, a precarious job market, and housing insecurity. These structural issues intersect with personal experiences of trauma and substance use, which cause a poverty trap.

4.5 Conclusion

English seaside towns, much like deindustrialised towns, suffer from deep-rooted socio-economic challenges that have been historically overlooked in academic and policy discourses. Despite being ‘one industry’ communities centred around tourism (Beatty & Fothergill 2004), they have not received equivalent recognition or support, leading to persistent deprivation and marginalisation (Agarwal et al. 2018; Fiorentino et al. 2024). Structural issues, such as poor housing conditions (Ward 2015; Agarwal et al. 2018), precarious employment (McDowell et al. 2020; Beatty & Fothergill 2004), and underappreciated local heritage (Light & Chapman 2022)—combine to entrench inequality and poverty.

Bournemouth and Poole have distinct but intertwined biographies. Poole’s history, as an industrial maritime hub, contrasts with the affluence of Sandbanks, while Bournemouth’s Victorian origins continue to influence its urban form. Both towns have faced intensified inequalities and austerity, with cuts to services, rising housing pressures, and spatial stigma – particularly affected the working-class areas of nested deprivation. Moreover, both towns have pursued ambitious rebranding strategies which promote growth but risk deepening housing exclusion and displacement. Their evolving biographies, then, reflect not only economic and policy shifts but also lived struggles and solidarity.

The testimonies from Bournemouth and Poole residents paint a stark picture of communities grappling with deeply embedded issues of homelessness, addiction, and rising crime. The visible normalisation of drug use in public spaces like ‘Dogshit Park’, as described in the walking interview with Shaun, underlines the extent to which addiction has become a daily presence. Aaron’s account further exposes the systemic failures in providing even the most basic support – such as communal toilets or kitchens.

These lived experiences illustrate a dual narrative: one of abandonment by social infrastructure and another of informal support networks stepping in to fill the void. Residents like Mark, Harry, and Carla express varying degrees of frustration, resignation, and concern over the increasing visibility of addiction and the seeming helplessness of communities. The link between drug use and crime is emphasised repeatedly, as residents recount the alarming rise in knife crime, muggings, and assaults, particularly among the younger generation.

Reflections from individuals like Chris, Caroline, and Corinne reinforce the idea that not only has crime increased, but its nature has become more violent, making many feel unsafe. The rise in drug usage has fundamentally altered the social fabric of these towns.

There are glimmers of positive change. Carla's observations about the impact of inclusive community initiatives demonstrate how engagement and investment at the grassroots level can reduce vandalism and begin to restore trust in shared spaces.

Corinne's reflection on poverty as "isolating" encapsulates the realities faced by many participants in this research. The preceding literature highlighted how these lived experiences are not individual failings but are shaped and intensified by structural and political processes.

Participants such as Becky, Simon, and Emily reveal how the design and implementation of UC not only fails to account for the complexity of people's lives but actively penalises them through inflexible rules, administrative failures, and punitive sanctioning (Cain 2016; Griffiths and Cain 2022; Andrews 2023). The reliance on digital systems and scripted interactions reduces people to data points, stripping claimants of agency and compassion (Meers 2020; Wood 2024). As with Maria's experience of PIP, these encounters are often degrading and dehumanising, reinforcing the moralistic narratives of deservingness and responsibility (Machin 2017; Newman 2023).

Ultimately, UC does not alleviate poverty or promote meaningful employment; instead, it reproduces stigma, inequality, and insecurity (Millar and Bennett 2017; Williams et al. 2022; Meers 2022). The system, as described by participants, is characterised by confusion, stress, and a persistent lack of humanity.

The experiences shared by participants, alongside extensive empirical research, reveal that food poverty in the UK is not a marginal issue but a growing consequence of structural inequalities and policy decisions. Carla's struggle to buy a meal with only a few pounds, and Tanya's calculation of the cost of a cup of tea, illustrate the everyday impacts of food insecurity in a context where every penny is accounted for. These are not isolated cases but part of a wider pattern of hardship exacerbated by the five-week UC wait for initial payment and the broader austerity agenda (Richards-Gray 2023).

While food banks are often stigmatised (Purdam, Garratt and Esmail 2016), they can also offer a space of community and dignity (Garthwaite 2016; Cloke, May and Williams 2017). Darren and Maria's accounts show how these spaces can function as points of connection, particularly for those isolated by poor mental health or hardship. Visram and Brown (2020) further support the notion that community fridges are not just practical solutions to hunger and food waste, but also contribute to tackling social exclusion. However, Darren's comment about perceived misuse shows the persistence of stigma and how tensions and competition emerge within the precariat, even among those reliant on the system themselves.

Food poverty is both a result and a symbol of a welfare system that has shifted its priorities. Rather than addressing the root causes of poverty (low wages, precarious employment, rising living costs) current policies shift responsibility onto individuals. This has not only increased demand for food banks and community fridges, but also shaped how those spaces are perceived and experienced.

Several participants reproduced stigmatising narratives about welfare dependency, despite relying on benefits themselves. For example, speaking of 'lazy' or 'work-shy' claimants, while simultaneously describing their own extensive efforts to navigate UC, manage conditionality, and survive with inadequate support. From a complex realist perspective, this contradiction reflects the internalisation of dominant neoliberal and moralising discourses about welfare, rather than a simple lack of awareness. For some participants, their lived realities were shaped by structural dependency on the welfare state, while their interpretations of that dependency were filtered through narratives that individualise responsibility and stigmatise claimants. In this respect their responses can be viewed as a response to welfare dependency that is contingent upon, but not fixed to, the wider context in which their individual agency was functioning.

Finally, the complex phenomenon of homelessness cannot be adequately understood through simplistic narratives that attribute blame solely to individual deficiencies. As Pleace (2016) cautions, reducing homelessness to personal failings ignores the crucial role of structural factors, yet fully absolving individuals of agency risks dehumanising them. The concept of MEH highlights the intertwined nature of homelessness with issues such as substance misuse, mental health, and involvement in the criminal justice system, shaped by

early life trauma and poverty. Moreover, the invisibility of certain groups, particularly women, within homelessness statistics calls for more nuanced and inclusive research approaches. Importantly, the dominant narratives focusing on addiction or personal failings serve to obscure the responsibility of state policies and societal structures, allowing for ongoing marginalisation.

5. Mental health

Corinne: “My life story is, I’ve been through a hell of a lot... over my years, from younger times well ‘til now, been through a lot of domestic violence, a lot of sexual abuse, rape, kidnap, you name it I’ve been through it.”

The previous chapter covered the lived experiences and material realities of the participants, discussing their feelings about their local areas/communities, their interactions with the welfare state and their difficulty with accessing food. The aim of the last chapter was to present an overview of the participants in the *present* and in *place*. This chapter builds on the previous chapter through focusing more on the *pasts* of the participants, exploring their (often traumatic) experiences, which are intrinsically linked with their mental health issues.

Mental health was one of most persistent themes to emerge in the semi-structured interviews. While this finding is unsurprising, it was not a pre-set focus of the research, and questions related to mental health were not initially part of the interview guide. Instead, the findings about a mental health crisis amongst participants emerged organically as a consistent theme and was developed through the utilisation an extended case study method.

Following a section overviewing the often-traumatic experiences shared by many of the participants, the next section of this chapter will provide a discussion of how modern British society, characterised by a glorification of individualism alongside a stigmatisation of dependency, has impacted perceptions of mental health. The subsequent section will explore how the individualistic-ideological underpinning has contributed to ineffective and difficult-to-access treatments, and where needs have gone unmet. Finally, the last section of this chapter will display how more community-based approaches to mental health treatment have been lifelines for many participants. However, to begin with, this introduction will briefly provide some context.

The mental health crisis and inequality

A recognition of mental health and the importance of it in relation to the precariat was made, somewhat indirectly, by Guy Standing (2020), in his *Battling Eight Giants*. In it, Standing argues that precarity and stress are two of eight ‘giant’ issues and presents an argument for basic income to mitigate these issues. Unlike his previous works, Standing was less focused on the ‘precariat’ as a class and more focused on ‘precarity’ as a symptom of poverty. Moreover, he chooses to list precarity and stress as two separate ‘giants’, despite the links between the two. Furthermore, in previous works on the precariat, Standing focused on ‘neoliberalism’ as the context for the creation of the precariat. But, in *Battling Eight Giants* he (2020: 28) narrows his focus to the Conservative-dominated austerity-era since 2010, and UC in particular: “Most NHS mental health trusts in England have reported that benefit changes and the roll-out of Universal Credit have increased mental ill-health and the demand for medical services. Uncertainty plays on the mind.” Ultimately, his focus on stress and mental health revolves around how the change to UC has negatively impacted the mental health of those in precarity.

However, one can be critical of Standing’s language. Using the word ‘stress’ to discuss mental health issues could take away from the legitimacy of people in poverty experiencing mental health issues, as, according to the World Health Organization website (2024), “Stress is a natural human response that prompts us to address challenges and threats in our lives. Everyone experiences stress to some degree”. This is supported by Mind (2020), whose website states that, “Sometimes, a small amount of stress can help us to complete tasks and feel more energised.” And that, “Stress is not normally considered a mental health problem.” By referring to mental health issues under the grand heading of ‘stress’, Standing (2020) is not giving recognition to the different ways stress can affect people, and is likely to affect people, based on their socioeconomic status or class.

On Mind’s (2025) website, under the heading “When is stress a problem?”, two types of stress are listed, which they argue can often affect mental health. These are the definitions provided:

- “Acute stress usually happens immediately after an upsetting or unexpected event. For example, a sudden bereavement, assault or natural disaster. It can last up to a month and is very intense.”
- “Chronic stress lasts for a long period of time or keeps coming back. You might experience this if you're under lots of pressure a lot of the time. You might also feel chronic stress if your day-to-day life is difficult, for example if you're a carer or if you're struggling to get by financially.”

One must recognise inequality when recognising the impact of stress and mental health issues. A useful tool for understanding this is Marmot's (2015) research. Marmot demonstrates that health inequality follows a social gradient, “Where you stand in in the social hierarchy – on the social ladder – is intimately related to your chances of getting ill, and your length of life.” (ibid.: 1). Moreover, Marmot (2015: 2) argues that one of the most determining factors for one's health is: “Autonomy – how much control you have over your life – and the opportunities you have for full social engagement and participation are crucial for health, well-being and longevity.” He links autonomy to a person's position on the social gradient, which supports an argument that stress is more likely to induce and/or exacerbate a mental health illness if you are in poverty. This view is supported by Ferguson (2000: 239): “[...] not only are the poor and working-class people more likely to suffer from mental ill-health but that the implications of being mentally ill are much more severe.” The participants in this study, as was demonstrated in the previous chapter, have a very low amount of autonomy, due to financial precarity. They are often reliant on foodbanks and charitable organisations for survival, and must adhere to rules and regulations enforced by the welfare state to ensure that they receive the welfare payments they are entitled to.

Garthwaite's (2016) research on foodbanks provides further context for understanding the mental health crisis. Like Standing (2020), Garthwaite focuses on how the Conservative Party, since 2010, took an approach to welfare payments that was damaging to the mental health of the precariat (although, she does not use this terminology to describe them). Garthwaite (2016: 131) reports that, “More than 100 people per day with mental health problems are having their benefits sanctioned. According to DWP data, the most common reason for being

sanctioned is that a person was late or did not turn up for a Work Programme appointment.” – again, they are being denied autonomy. This practice displays a lack of humility and empathy for people suffering from both mental illness and poverty, as the two intersect. For people relying on foodbanks, spending £2 on a bus ticket to a Work Programme appointment can be considered a *big* expense. For people with mental health issues, a bus journey can be distressing, when the two are combined, a JobCentre appointment can become an impossible task. This is not the only example of mistreatment of people living in precarity by a Conservative/Conservative-led government, since 2010: “In early 2011, the Coalition reassessed 2.5 million people with physical and mental illnesses for their incapacity benefits. In turn, hundreds of thousands of highly vulnerable, mentally unwell claimants were judged fit for work and no longer entitled to government support. In four out of 10 cases, the original decision was overturned, proving that they had been mistakenly judged fit for work in the first place.” (Garthwaite 2016: 132). This lack of humility and empathy is a strong theme that emerged from this research. However, it also displays a lack of competence in the process of administering claimants benefits. For example, Wistow (2022) illustrates this lack of competence, when discussing the assessments of disabled people applying for personal independence payments (PIP), which were contracted to two private companies (that lacked professional expertise around health and disability issues) between 2013 and 2016, with many decisions being successfully appealed by claimants. Wistow (ibid.: 47) draws on data from Disability Rights UK to state the following: “It is hard not to conclude that these issues are symptomatic of the development of social policy in an economy that is not functioning to serve society.” – Contracting these services out is part of the neoliberal 'roll out' within the state, private companies working to contracts and profit logic in the context of delivering economic value at the expense of social value.

Now that I have established the importance of mental health to a focus on the precariat, the chapter now moves to untangle some of the ways that participants' pasts impacted their mental health struggles.

5.1 Trauma

This section of the chapter will be organised under four sub-headings: domestic abuse; addiction; growing up in care; and bereavement – four dominant themes that emerged through a thematic analysis of the data – as it was found that these four themes had a significant contribution to the negative mental health of the participants. However, it is worth noting that for many of the participants two or more of these sub-headings intersected in creating traumatic experiences.

5.1.1 Domestic Abuse

Many of the participants had childhood experiences that have left them with deep-rooted trauma, causing long-lasting mental health issues. A common problem faced by many of the participants was the experience of domestic violence as children. It is a highly emotive topic, so some of the participants did not wish to share much – the following short responses were typical:

Jack: “Abusive father stuff like that, so yeah, I don’t wanna go into too many details on that.”

Clare: “Yeah, been battered and suffered domestic violence, everything that you can imagine.”

The participants were not pushed to share further details on traumatic experience when it was clear that they did not feel comfortable and safe to do so. For example, in the quote below James described his father as being ‘just not a very good man’, but was not pressed for further details:

James: “So, my mum was always in and out of hospital... so, I was with my dad most of the time and he just wasn’t a very good man, you know... just wasn’t a nice bloke... erm, I lost my mum when I was 15... and then... just started doing drugs...and then started going out with my friends and that and then... becoming homeless when I was 18, and then went to jail.”

James was seeming to allude to domestic abuse. The above quote indicates how James’ life-chances were negatively impacted early on in life, and kept spiralling to the point where he was imprisoned immediately after his childhood ended and his adulthood began, which links to Marmot’s argument relating to a lack of autonomy causing mental health issues (Marmot 2015). Chris had a similar life-story to James, suffering from domestic abuse for nearly the entirety of his childhood, before finding himself homeless at the age of only 14:

Chris: “Basically, my dad, when I lived at home, my dad beat me up 12 years on and off... he was going after me from a young age... then my dad kicked me out, back on and off, two months here, two months there... a month here, a month there... kept beating me up every day, and it got worse over the years... so, I ended up running away when I was 14, ended up on the streets.”

Unlike Chris, Sam is not homeless. But, again, domestic abuse significantly affected his early life:

Sam: “Got punched... erm... told to go live with my mum after she died... erm... locked out in pissing rain in a vest and shorts....”

Researcher: “By your dad?”

Sam: “Yeah by my dad, so you know, I’ve had a lot of things thrown at me.”

There is a consensus view (and, at least to me, an unsurprising one) supported by various studies that witnessing and/or experiencing domestic abuse in childhood has a negative impact on the mental health of the child, which often continues into adulthood (*see for example* Russell, Springer & Greenfield 2010; Meltzer, Doos, Vostanis, Ford & Goodman 2009; Sharratt, Mason & Wager 2022; McCloskey, Figueredo & Koss 1995). For many of the participants in this research, this was certainly the case.

5.1.2 Addiction

As well as domestic violence, many of the participants’ childhood trauma was the result of intersecting factors. Brad’s childhood story is particularly harrowing, as he dealt with addiction, domestic violence, and bereavement. These following two quotes are from separate points in his interview:

Brad: “Well, my family passed away, they’re all alcoholics. My mum got breast cancer when I was 15, my stepdad helped my mum, then he died of cancer, then she drank herself to death on White Lightning... then I had to look after my dad for 12 years and I had to put him in a care home, my step-mum got cancer, died when I was 17... erm... all my family’s dead, so I’ve just ended up on the streets with no one to help me.”

Brad: “Parents were alcoholics, they split up when I was 7, moved around Bournemouth, around battered wives homes.”

Brad remains living on the streets, but, unlike many of the participants, he avoided drugs and alcohol completely. Kelly, like Brad, has experienced addiction, domestic violence and bereavement. However, unlike Brad, Kelly sadly did not manage to avoid the pitfalls of addiction:

Kelly: “Witnessed a lot of domestic violence... got bullied all through school... then dropped out of school... turned to drugs... had a baby... sorted it out... had my kids for nine years... then my mum died, my daughter got abused and then social took my kids and I fell homeless and then... got a house, started on the drugs again... got pregnant, they took my baby and now I’m homeless again and pregnant again, it’s great, innit.”

On the day of Kelly’s interview, the following reflection was made in the research diary:

Research Diary (22/09/25): “[...] if she had been born into a different family or in a different place you could imagine she would have been very successful. She had such natural charisma and an obvious deep-down desire to be a good mother and provider.”

Sadly, addiction has prevented Kelly from being the mother she wants to be, and wishes to be in the future. On the day of her interview, she revealed she had been ‘clean’ from heroin for three days, with her baby-bump already showing. It would be naive and wrong to argue that Kelly is in her precarious position due to the changing job market created by neoliberalism. Kelly is stuck in her predicament because of traumatic experiences in childhood, way beyond her control and far from the comprehension of people fortunate enough not to have had those experiences.

Drug and alcohol addiction was common among the homeless participants and often came up organically and very casually in semi-structured interviews:

Jay: “I used to be on heroin, but I’ve stopped it now.”

Jake: “Too many magic mushrooms and [I] was diagnosed schizophrenic.”

The drug use by many participants was so normalised that it was difficult to find an explanation for why they turned to drugs in the first place. Often, it seemed that it was a behaviour learned from close family members at an early age. However, this was not always the case – some of the drug-addicted participants came from families with no history of drug addiction.

Steve, a formerly street-homeless man who is now a Big Issue seller, offered some explanation for why people become drug and alcohol addicts in the first place:

Researcher: “What makes people become drug addicts?”

Steve: “They go downhill a little bit and a lot of people who’re homeless start drinking just to get to sleep, you know what I mean, then they get addicted to the drink, some of them start taking drugs and once they get on the heroin and that crack cocaine it finishes them off, it ruins them, but the only person who can get them out of that is themselves, they can get all the help but you gotta want the help before people can help you, you know what I mean.”

What is pertinent in Steve’s quote is the line, ‘the only person who can get them out of that is themselves’. The participants viewed their mental health issues primarily as an individualised issue, rather than as a structural one. This issue will be returned to later in this chapter.

5.1.3 Growing up in care

Often as a result of childhood experiences of addiction and/or domestic violence, four of the forty interviewees had experience of living in care. As such, this study also brings focus to the issues with the welfare state's provisions for children in need of care:

Tanya: "I went through three children's homes, five foster homes and I was then a runaway in the care system. I disappeared until probably from 13 until 6 weeks before my 16th birthday."

Aaron: "I grew up in children's homes for 16 years, erm... my mother was shot dead by the police in Ireland, I grew up in children's homes."

Steve: "I was then put into care when I was three years old, I never ever went back to my parents... erm, I spent 15/16 years in prison."

Emily: "I grew up in care, so did my partner."

The care system for children has many faults, but they weren't a focal point of this research. Moreover, the above participants who talked about growing up in care only did so in passing. However, it is worth noting that the literature supports an argument that not only are children in care more likely to suffer ill-mental health, but it is likely to be more complex, also (*see* Tarren-Sweeney 2008).

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2022) reports that "More than half (52%) of looked-after children born in the academic year ending 1994 who attended school in England had a criminal conviction by the age of 24 years compared with 13% of children who had not

been in care.” These types of statistics highlight the inequality of outcome between those who grow up in the care system and those who do not. They also shed light on the failure of the welfare services provided for children who are unable to stay with a parent or parents. Moreover, ONS (ibid.) also reports that 50% of children in care suffer from issues of “social, emotional and mental health.”, and this finding is supported by scholars in the field (*see for example* Pecora et al. 2009).

One could argue that children who grow up in care, based on the ONS statistics and consensus within academic literature, are more likely to form part of the precariat than those who did not grow up in a ‘looked-after’ environment. The whole care system is inherently precarious in terms of, for example, where children will be placed, for how long, and how those placements will work out. The children themselves have no idea and often neither do the stakeholders until the very last minute. Therefore, precarity is more foundationally built into the experience of care experienced children. However, many of these children would not appear in the ‘precariat’ of Standing (2011) or of Foti (2017). For Standing, they would more likely fall into the category of ‘*lumpenprecariat*’ and for Foti they would more likely fall into the category of ‘underclass’. It is only Savage’s definition of the precariat, used as the basis for finding the participants in this research, where children in care would fit well into the precariat. Despite being the only four participants who discussed growing up in care, the findings from these interviews were otherwise, striking, in terms of the similarities between their experiences and those of the other participants. This suggests that there is a degree of commonality of lived experience among members of the precariat, despite sometimes quite different life histories.

5.1.4 Bereavement

It’s also important to point out that not all of the participants’ traumatic childhoods were a result of negative relationships with their parents and/or having parents consumed by addiction. However, the participants without those issues often had been bereaved and that had affected their mental health. However, again, it is worth noting that this issue did intersect with other issues for some of the participants.

Annette did not have any issues of addiction or domestic abuse in her childhood, but still encountered extreme trauma:

Annette: “My brother, who was between me and the next girl down, drowned when he was two-and-a-half years old, and I was the only witness.... Erm, and I have my youngest sisters, one of them committed suicide and the other has schizophrenia, which was triggered by my mother’s death when they were still in school.”

Some of the participants did not discuss experiencing any childhood trauma, but did face trauma in their adult lives that has negatively impacted their mental health. For example, Mark had a stable career in his early adulthood, but it was derailed by one negative experience:

Mark: “I also had PTSD, because when I was 23, working on the railways, a mate of mine, we were working together, and he died at work. That is still with me, erm... I used to wake in cold sweats, screaming, everything.”

Another example is Carla, one of only two participants who attended university. Carla, despite coming from a working-class background, established a traditionally middle-class career as a schoolteacher. However, she suffered extreme pain and loss when her child was still very young:

Carla: “Part of the story is my son’s father passed away. He struggled with his mental health...”

Carla’s husband died by suicide. Research indicates that losing a partner to suicide increases the risk of mental health issues, and suicide, exponentially (*see* Pitman, Osborn, King & Erlangsen 2014).

Like Carla, Harry also experienced the trauma of losing a partner:

Harry: “Then my next partner she overdosed and died in my arms, about three years ago.”

It is somewhat unsurprising that losing a loved one, through death, can oftentimes be a causal explanation for mental health issues. Moreover, many of the participants in this research suffered a sudden and tragic loss, which research suggests elevates the likelihood of mental health disorders developing (*see* Kristensen, Weisæth & Heir 2012).

Martha has also experienced bereavement. On top of this she also suffered serious health issues. These saw her go from having a relatively stable life to one of precarity and trauma:

Martha: “Six years ago I met somebody and we got married and were quite happy and then five years ago I actually got diagnosed with breast cancer... and then, I ended up having two operations, I ended up having six lots of chemo and 15 lots of radiotherapy... erm... and, found out in-between chemo and radiotherapy that he was cheating on me.”

For those participants who experienced particularly traumatic and/or significant (for example, due to the timing in their life courses) bereavement this often led many of these to become trapped into poverty and precarity.

5.2 Individualism and mental health

There is a consensus view in academic research, that unemployment and precarious employment has a negative effect on mental health, as jobs provide status, structure, self-

esteem (*see for example* Artazcoz, Benach, Borrell & Cortès 2004). Conversely, finding work after a period of unemployment is very likely to improve mental health (Paul & Moser 2009). However, while research clearly presents how poverty negatively affects and intersects with mental health issues, the practice of solving/dealing with mental health issues does not always reflect this. The purpose of this section is to portray how neoliberal individualism has had a detrimental impact on perceptions of mental health.

An individual problem

Chris's story highlights the shortcomings of the services provided to help people deal with their mental health issues. Chris felt alone and instead of being offered effective treatment to help him deal with his trauma, he has attempted to take his own life on multiple occasions:

Chris: "I've had self-harm... tried OD-ing... tried committing suicide."

Researcher: "Can I ask why?"

Chris: "Because I thought I was lost, I put myself in a dark place... like, when my dad was hitting me I felt worthless... I didn't think there was anyone there."

That quote, 'I didn't think there was anyone there', highlights how mental health support is frequently absent for people in great need, with many people like Chris all-too-often left to feel alone. The findings suggest that participants felt that their problems are not treated as structural societal issues and that the onus is on the individual to solve their mental health issues for themselves, and the state is devoid of responsibility or accountability.

There are two traditional arguments in the social sciences as to why individuals in *lower* social classes are more likely to experience mental health issues (Perry 1996: 18)

- The natural selection position – Theorists who take this position argue that individuals who have ‘weaknesses in mental functioning’ are more likely to be in a lower social class and that it is the ‘weakness in mental functioning’ that causes ‘low social class attainment’. Basically, poor mental health causes an individual to be in a *lower* social class.
- The social causation theory – “[...] members of the lower social classes experience excess psychological stress and relatively few societal rewards, the results of which are manifested in psychological disorder.” Basically, being in a *lower* social class can cause an individual to suffer from poor mental health.

The social causation theory was the most-accepted theory in academia (*see* Gans 1995; Ferguson 2000). However, Davies (2021: 5), a supporter of the social causation theory, argues that the natural selection position seems to have more prominence in modern Britain: “[...] we are rapidly becoming a nation sedated by mental health interventions that greatly overplay the help they bring; that subtly teach us to accept and endure, rather than to stand up and challenge, the social and relational conditions harming us and holding us back.”

Davies’ seminal work places a great emphasis on the changing nature of work in the neoliberal era, which has parallels to theories about the precariat. Davies argues that the following changes to work-life have had the biggest impact on mental health:

- More working hours – Neoliberalism demands a 24-hour economy, therefore overtime has become ‘obligatory’.
- More commuting – People are now less likely to work in the community they live in, and must commute far longer than was the norm pre-deindustrialisation.
- Less time in a job – The amount of time people spend in a job, on average, has halved. People now are likely to change jobs every six years.

Davies (ibid.: 135) adds more context, taking aim at New Labour's rebranding of Unemployment Benefits in the late-90s, where Jobseeker's Allowance was reintroduced: "This new phrase conveyed the idea that receiving benefits now depended upon you actively seeking work, implying that joblessness was a result of not doing so hard enough."

As previously mentioned, mental health was not chosen as a focal point of the research before it began but became a dominant theme as the extended case method was implemented. Therefore, the focus on individualism in relation to mental health was also not a theme before the research began. However, in some of the first few semi-structured interviews, mental health issues were discussed as being individual and not structural issues. Becky recognises that low levels of income make mental health issues harder to deal with. However, when asked if she thinks income affects the chances of having mental health issues in the first place, she says she thinks not:

Becky: "Erm... I've had therapy, CBT therapy. It's helped me manage. In the last month or so I've had to go back because I started withdrawing from everything. Obviously, I didn't find any joy going to work, I didn't want to interact with people. Erm... they've classed me as I've got depression now."

Researcher: "Does income affect mental health?"

Becky: "I don't think so because everyone... Everyone's different... but, with my anxiety, it heightens so much... It makes you worry about everything all through the night... it doesn't shut them off, that little voice in the back of your head..."

Barbara somewhat echoed this sentiment in her interview, giving mention to a prominent middle-class celebrity with mental health issues:

Barbara: “I think there should be more support for people with mental health issues in housing places, because my housing officer doesn’t seem to. If you’ve got mental health issues he thinks you’re not the brightest tool in the shed, and it doesn’t work like that. You might have like Stephen Fry, he’s got mental health issues yet he’s as intelligent as anyone.”

Becky and Barbara both display what could be described as a ‘luck of the draw’ attitude towards mental health. While they are both able to reflect on how their precarious lives impacts their mental health, they do not give much recognition to structural factors or inequalities being the *cause* of their mental health. Instead, they were more aligned to genetic pre-dispositions as an explanatory causal factor.

Seeing mental health issues in this way can have a dangerous impact on treatment, as people begin to see themselves and their own strength as the only way to solve their mental health issues, even after seeking medical advice:

John: “Uh... put it this way, I’ve got very, very low when I knew I was gonna hit the streets and I did call a few lines for help and things... as long as I can see there’s a bit of progress, I’m fine. It’s when you don’t hear anything that’s really irritating, especially from the council, who are probably doing things but they won’t tell you what they’re doing, and you just want a bit of information.”

Researcher: “Have you had any help for your mental health issues?”

John: “Yeah, I’ve been to my old GP and... yes, he gave me... erm... he gave me some pills and... you begin to think, ‘hang on, this is... I’ve gotta get over this for myself as well’, so yeah”

After coming close to suicide, John had the realisation that he alone needed to sort out his mental health problems, despite already being homeless and despite already speaking to a doctor. John was not placing the blame on structural factors for causing his mental health issues but on his own shortcomings as an individual.

Terry, who is homeless, does not suffer from mental health issues, but his quote is still highly indicative of the issue of individualism, as he takes a sense of pride in the fact he does not have mental health issues:

Terry: “Mine’s pretty good considering the lifestyle I lead, because I don’t let things get me down, I don’t dwell on things... Erm... I tend to laugh a lot... I got fucking drowned this week, I don’t know how many times I’ve been wet this week... When I’m wet I think it could depress me, you see how that could happen, imagine you’ve got two sets of clothes and they’re both wet, even your boxers are wet, that’s it... so, you could be really down and really depressed but I’m just like ‘fuck it, who cares?’... It’s an unusual mindset.”

Brad is another participant who does not suffer mental health issues:

Researcher: “Have you had mental health issues?”

Brad: “Nah... I know life is tough, you know what I mean. You just gotta get on with it, you can’t just feel sorry for yourself, it doesn’t work like that.”

There is a stark difference between Terry and Brad, as Brad did not discuss his lack of mental health issues with a sense of pride. Brad, unlike Terry, comes from a family ravaged by mental illness and addiction, and feels a great sense of luck that he has so far managed to avoid mental health issues, despite his circumstances. Terry, on the other hand, comes from a traditionally

middle-class background and did not have a traumatic childhood, despite later finding himself homeless.

A desire for independence

Some of the participants also displayed a desire to maintain a sense of independence. They refuse to ask for or accept help:

Matthew: “Yeah, like suicidal thoughts, stuff like that, you know, and that sort of thing.”

Researcher: “Have you had any help?”

Matthew: “Yeah, but I haven’t accepted it, so it’s my bad.”

Researcher: “Why not?”

Matthew: “It’s just me own self like a personal preference, quite renowned to shut down help.”

Matthew has a lack of trust in medical professionals and the advice they could give him. It seems that he fears any intervention in his health would only further infringe on his autonomy. In this respect, we might interpret this finding as an example of a resistance to being considered to be dependent and, therefore, a desire to be independent and autonomous. Sam has a similar outlook:

Sam: “I suffer with anxiety and depression myself, so yeah, I do feel that because try’n’a make a living, try’n’a deal with a four-year-old, try’n’a live a good life, try’n’a keep a car, try’n’a stay happy, it’s not the easiest, it’s not the easiest.”

Researcher: “Do you get any help?”

Sam: “I can do, when I ask for it in the place I’m living in, but the problem is, obviously, I like my independence, so I don’t wanna ask for help.”

Again, this is indicative of an individualised mindset – worried that asking for help would be a sign of weakness. Here we can see both the appeal and influence of the individualism underpinning elements of neoliberalism and how these cuts diverse sections of society (*see, for example*, Fevre 2016 and Wistow 2022). Sam has worked hard to gain custody of his daughter and works tirelessly to try and provide an upbringing for her that he was not so lucky to have himself – one defined by love. Therefore, he is fearful that asking for help with his own mental health could risk his relationship with his daughter, as the two are still very reliant on the welfare state to survive. In this respect, we see how in-work poverty and precarity overlap with the welfare state. For the precariat the labour market often does not provide sufficient material wealth or security, especially for those with children.

A recognition of precarity as a factor

While a sense of individualism and a desire for independence did emerge as themes of the discussions around mental health, it cannot be said that all of the participants shared this belief:

Colin: “Erm... I think, obviously, erm... people who come from a more privileged upbringing tend to have a sorta smoother, more nurtured upbringing, are less likely to

have those sort of issues. Erm... I think people in slightly more deprived life... erm, are more likely to suffer from problems of addiction and other areas and then, erm.”

Jack: “People can’t help mental health issues can they.... A lot of them, 9 times out of 10, have had hard lives in poverty, things like that, all sorts really, isn’t it...”

In the focus groups, the participants were asked about the mental health crisis and if it was linked to poverty:

Researcher: “Are we in a mental health crisis?”

Tanya: “Absolutely.”

Kevin: “I agree with that.”

Charlie: “No, but you’re saying like mental health and that but the way things are at the moment, it’s bound to make people feel down.”

Researcher: “Does being financially insecure cause mental health issues?”

Tanya: “Yes”

Charlie: “Yes”

Kevin: “100%”

Charlie: “I mean it’s like, you know, if you haven’t got money, what do you go without?”

Carla: “It’s about priorities at the end of the day, that pressure is on to provide all of the time and you haven’t got the resources, there’s the stress, and there’s things like domestic abuse, there’s all these pressures.”

In a focus group setting and when asked explicitly about the nature of the mental health crisis and if it was a structural or individual issue, the participants were clear that structural issues of poverty and inequality are to blame for the crisis. This contrasts somewhat with an emphasis placed on this being an individual issue throughout the semi-structured interviews conducted for this study.

The second focus group shared a similar opinion to the first:

Researcher: “Did you end up here because of mental health issues or are the mental health issues a result of you ending up here?”

Frank: “Both.”

Tommy: “Both”

Researcher: “Is there a link between poverty and mental health?”

Thomas: “Poverty makes it worse.”

Tommy: “It makes it worse, 100%. If you don’t have the stresses of bills, their money, their benefits, their lack of benefits, your mental health will still be there but it’ll probably be a lot better rather than, you know, you’re constantly worrying, you’re constantly stressed, you’re constantly anxious, it’s ridiculous.”

Many of the mental health issues affecting the participants were not directly caused by drug addiction, but drug use exacerbated them. Jakob discussed this in his walking interview, where he was able to balance an individualised mindset towards addiction, while recognising the fault of government for not making structural changes and policies that could alleviate such issues.

Walking interview with Jakob (09/11/23): “Jakob is an interesting character because he is in some ways lacking sympathy for his fellow homeless but in other ways he is caring for them. He tells me that the drugs and alcohol abuse is a choice and that they don’t want to help themselves. He is actively searching for work and makes an effort to look good (as I mentioned, he did not look homeless), but he recognises that other homeless people are only concerned with getting money for drugs and that is all. I asked him if he had any issues with drugs or alcohol in his past and he said no more than the usual person does. However, despite displaying a relative lack of sympathy for his fellow homeless people, he went on to talk about how the government and local council waste millions of pounds on projects that could be spent on housing the homeless. He points out to me building after building which he tells me is empty and says that there is enough space for all of the local homeless community to be housed.”

Jakob is actively searching for work and makes a visible effort to look ‘presentable’. Jakob was clean-shaven, wearing tidy jeans, trainers and a zipped jacket, and had neatly kept hair. He carried himself confidently. In contrast to other participants, there were no visible markers

commonly associated with street homelessness such as signs of prolonged rough sleeping. To an unfamiliar passer-by, Jakob could easily have been read as housed or temporarily unemployed rather than homeless. Jakob's emphasis on appearance, self-presentation and employability reflects a broader neoliberal moral economy in which homelessness is stratified through notions of effort, deservingness and individual responsibility.

To conclude this section, it is clear that neoliberal-individualism has influenced perceptions of mental health, despite some clear recognition of structural factors emerging most prominently in the focus groups. Perry (1996: 27) argues that "[...] it is much easier both from a conservative political position and from a treatment perspective, to believe in internal and largely organic explanations of mental disorders." This leads to non-effective treatments, that do not deal with the root causes of mental health issues, but only seek to medicalise, individualise and depoliticise such issues (Davies 2021). This is particularly damaging for the precariat, who lack the means to access better quality support and treatments and must rely on stretched and under-funded public services. More fundamentally, the tendency towards individual and medical framings of the root causes of mental health does not deal with the 'causes of the causes' of ill-health, which has a disproportionate impact lower down the 'social gradient' in health (Marmot, et al., 2020). It is in this respect that the depoliticization of the issue is likely to have a greater impact on members of the precariat, precisely because the environmental and material causes of ill-health are marginalised through focus on the individual rather than the society they inhabit.

5.3 Unmet needs

"We blame suffering on faulty minds and brains rather than on harmful social, political and work environments. We promote highly profitable drug interventions, which if great news for big pharmaceutical corporations, in the long term hold millions of people back." (Davies 2021: 2).

The above quote offers a good summary of how an individualised perspective on mental health can play out in terms of treatment – i.e., there is a tendency to medicalise mental health treatment whilst reducing the causation of this to the individual rather than the environments in which lived experience is situated. This section will illustrate a lack of effective treatment and services and the shortcomings in these experienced by the participants in this study.

Aaron, an Irish immigrant, provided a good summary of the tendency to treat mental health through pharmaceutical means, rather than dealing with the environment in which people live and through providing more relational forms of treatment:

Aaron: “It’s not usually the drugs. The drug’s usually like an iceberg situation, the mental health is the issue. The mental health of most people in this town is very poor, erm... very, very, very poor, most people are needing reassurance, most people, as I say, need a counsellor, most people need somebody to talk to them, most people need somebody to listen to them, most people are very, very, very good at making money and doing things for a life that’s mostly criminal to feed their habit, but their habit is a relationship they’ve dealt with themselves because the situation they’re in, being homeless in the first place.”

Aaron continued to explain that:

Aaron: “I’m a paranoid schizophrenic, diagnosed and medicated now and have been medicated for 11 years now and them whole 11 years I’ve been good but before that I was completely chaotic and I spent a lot of time in therapy, I spent a long time in care and I spent a long time dealing with the issues and trauma in my life, but, I was given that by, erm, people in my country [Republic of Ireland], they wouldn’t give me that over here, they wouldn’t give me anything. England’s terrible for their own people, in my opinion.”

Not only are services lacking and non-effective but, in some cases, provisions have made participants mental health worse. Brendan's time in a mental health hospital has left him with trauma, and a decade on from being sectioned he is still homeless and addicted to drugs.

Brendan: "I was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia back in 2004 I think it was, yeah, so I do have mental health issues."

Researcher: "How is the help you receive for that?"

Brendan: "It's not great, I mean I got sectioned by them, erm... in 2013 I think it was, and I spent six months in a mental health hospital and it was absolutely awful, really bad."

Shaun has suffered from mental health issues since childhood, and has never been given adequate treatment to help him deal with it. He thinks that people like him are being 'swept under the rug':

Shaun: "I kind of was like, just like really naughty and that in school, struggled a lot with me mental health, but at that time not many people really understood what mental health was... I was self-harming, had no self-confidence, like, I was struggling a lot with stealing and just things like that, and it's hard because a lot of these places don't have a lot of staff, but, yeah, coming to BH1 I see a lot of young people with mental health issues that haven't had any proper support and then have an addictive nature and now they've got a raging drug addiction and they get used because they've got mental health issues and people using their vulnerabilities and it's horrible when I see it, but for me, that a massive problem that's being swept under the rug of the system and forgotten about, I guess."

Some of the participants were less negative about their treatment. Like Harry, who is grateful for the treatment he is receiving:

Harry: "I've got psychosis, I've got borderline schizophrenia."

Researcher: "What caused those issues?"

Harry: "Probably my life, a lot of it, trauma and stuff."; "I'm with We Are With You, they're supporting me... Uh, Big Issue are supporting me and Hope House are supporting me as well... Erm, I've also just changed my doctors recently. I had trouble getting my medication, if I don't get my medication I have trouble sleeping... I'm getting to see a mental health team here sorting everything out slowly but surely, yeah..."

Harry displays a tacit acceptance of his mental health issues and the slow pace of receiving help.

Not only are the treatments provided for the participants in this study often not effective, sometimes they are completely unmet. Kelly, the pregnant woman who sleeps in a bus depot, clearly has a high level of need for both addiction and mental health support but these needs are largely unmet:

Researcher: "How long have you been clean?"

Kelly: "3 days"

Researcher: “Do you get much help?”

Kelly: “No”

Researcher: “So you haven’t had much help to get you off the drugs?”

Kelly: “No”

Researcher: “Have you had mental health issues?”

Kelly: “Yeah, suffered depression, PTSD... bipolar...”

Emily, unlike Kelly, is not homeless. However, she has had a similar experience with mental health welfare:

Emily: “I didn’t realise until 6 months ago they think I’m autistic as well as ADHD and mental health, and my mental health is diagnosed but the autistic side initially wasn’t, so I’ve found that quite hard because we’re... it’s not... there’s no support for that as well, there’s no support for that neither, like no support for homeless families, no support for mental health, it is hard.”

While medical intervention is clearly needed and desired by many of the participants, one thing that was constantly highlighted was a need just for someone to listen. Like James, who said, ‘if I can talk to someone about it, it’s not as bad’:

James: “Uh... so, my mental health, yeah, is mainly like, I suffer really bad ADHD... so, one moment I’ll be all happy and all that and one minute I’ll feel depressed... I don’t know, I find if I can talk to someone about it, it’s not as bad.”

Researcher: “Do you get a lot of support?”

James: “Not with mental health and stuff like that, I don’t... I was on Steps2Wellbeing and because I didn’t wanna talk about stuff when I was younger they said there’s nothin’ more they could do... and I found when I got out of jail there was no help for me.”

Many of the participants discussed the Steps2Wellbeing programme, a free NHS Talking Therapies service for adults in Dorset and Southampton, aimed at helping those with anxiety and depression. The service offers counselling, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, among other services. However, I found no evidence of any users finding it effective in helping with their mental health struggles. Like James, above, who was told there was nothing they could do for him when he refused to speak about certain traumatic experiences, rather than finding alternate ways of helping his address his issues.

5.4 The importance of community

I attended community centres regularly over several months, often multiple times per week, spending extended periods observing, talking informally with attendees, and participating in everyday routines such as shared meals or making tea. Over time, my presence became familiar rather than intrusive; I was greeted casually, included in conversations, and occasionally checked on when absent, mirroring the relational care described by participants themselves.

So far, this chapter has made an argument that the current provisions for people in poverty and suffering from mental health issues are lacking in efficiency and effectiveness. This leaves the question, what is the alternative?

Darren: “I’m basically a loner, my story is of being an addict. Addiction has ruined my life, it’s been my whole life...”

Researcher: “What have you been addicted to?”

Darren: “You name it, everything. Drugs, sex, gambling, I’ve just got an addictive personality, I guess.”

Darren feels alone and is facing his addiction issues by himself, having given up hopes of accessing effective medical support. And, as discussed in this chapter, the current provisions, like Steps2Wellbeing and drug therapy, don’t seem to be alleviating the mental health crisis, from the point of view of members of the precariat participating in this study.

This following set of quotes from one of the focus groups highlight the importance of community-based approaches to mental health care:

Researcher: “Talk to me about the mental health crisis, is there enough help given to people?”

Frank: “No”

Tommy: “I think the support’s out there, but I don’t think it’s advertised very well, like, I play for a football team on Tuesday and Thursday that’s to do with mental health but it’s not advertised, it’s not put out there, so unless you know about it...”

Kyle: “I’ve been trying to get counselling because I was on drugs for a long time and all of that, been to the doctors, psychiatric doctors, I can’t get any help, I’ve had to create a counselling service here for people in similar situations.”

Frank: “That’s why this place is full everyday... you come here every day and this place is choc-a-bloc from 10 o’clock onwards, people what got drug addictions, depression, anxiety.”

Tommy: “All mental health issues.”

Frank: “Mental health issues, poverty, it’s all in here, bruv.”

Kyle: “And if this place closed down...”

Frank: “If this place closed down, we’re all fucked.”

Thomas: “And it’s nearly impossible to get in touch with like specialist mental health specialists, it’s like nearly impossible, the waiting lists are ridiculous.”

Frank: “The waiting list is 6 months to a year.”

Tommy: “You’re always told ‘ring this, ring that’, but, it’s like, sometimes you don’t wanna speak to someone on the phone.”

The focus groups took place in a local community centre that functioned as an informal support hub for people experiencing poverty, addiction and mental distress. The centre was modest in appearance: a large, open room with worn sofas, mismatched chairs and tables, a small kitchen area offering tea and coffee, and noticeboards advertising food parcels, recovery groups and volunteering opportunities. Throughout the day, people came and went freely, greeting one another by name. Conversations overlapped, music played quietly in the background, and the space carried the familiar hum of everyday sociality rather than the formality of a clinical or bureaucratic setting.

Frank’s belief that “If this place closed down, we’re all fucked.” succinctly indicates the importance of community for people suffering from mental health issues. While going to the doctors, speaking to someone over a phone, taking medication may be effective and necessary for some, it was the consensus view of all participants in both focus groups that community groups/organisations were the most important factor in maintaining the mental health of the participants.

These accounts are inseparable from the material and social environment of the centre itself. Unlike formal mental health services, which participants described as distant, bureaucratic and difficult to access, the community centre operated through immediacy, familiarity and mutual recognition. Support was not scheduled, assessed or medicalised, but embedded in everyday interaction — being noticed, being missed, and being able to speak without fear of judgement.

Charlie: “Before I started to come over here... I live on my own, and if it wasn’t for the people over here, I don’t know what I’d do, I’d probably top myself by now... It’s so friendly over here, you know what I mean? I come over here every day.”

Researcher: “What sort of support is there for mental health?”

Kevin: “You can see a doctor and you’re just offered Steps2Wellbeing.”

Charlie: “Yeah”

Kevin: “You make a phone call, it is absolutely diabolical, you can’t get an appointment, you have to do it over the phone, if you do you’re expected to travel all the way to Boscombe, or somewhere, and if you’re suffering from depression you aren’t going to get a bus and go all the way to Boscombe because it’s gonna take you, from here, an hour-and-a-half.”

Charlie: “Well, you know, I come here every day, and if I’m not here by 11 o’clock I’ve got someone on the phone, ‘are you alright?’, ‘are you coming over?’, I mean, you know, it’s great to come over here to talk because everyone who comes in this establishment has got a problem, and they’re not frightened to talk to a stranger about it, you know, it makes you feel a lot better, it really does.”

Tanya: “The community feel here over the last 6 months...”

Charlie: “It’s been absolutely brilliant because everyone cares about everybody.”

Charlie’s experience of spending days talking to people at the community centre is all that has stopped him taking his own life. After a lifetime of work, and now living in poverty in retirement, relying on foodbanks for survival, Charlie feels a great sense of shame. But, the community centre offers him a sense of relief, a sense that he is not alone in his problems, and

a sense of community that has been eroded in working-class communities over the last four decades.

5.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has revealed that mental health struggles among the participants cannot be understood solely through the lens of economic instability or precarious employment. While these structural conditions undoubtedly contribute to distress, they are often considered by the participants to be secondary to deep-rooted personal traumas, such as childhood abuse, domestic violence, bereavement, and experiences within the care system. These intersecting forms of trauma highlight the inadequacy of dominant narratives that frame mental health issues as either individual failings or inevitable outcomes of poverty alone.

What emerges instead is a complex, layered understanding of mental illness, that challenges the prevailing neoliberal discourse. The participants' experiences speak to a broader need for mental health support systems that go beyond medication and talking therapies, recognising the limitations of medicalised, individualised treatments. Many participants yearned not for clinical interventions, but for emotional connection, understanding, and a space to be heard – needs more effectively met by community-based services than by the formal healthcare system.

Participants frequently individualised responsibility for mental distress, even when describing experiences rooted in structural trauma, deprivation, and institutional failure. Rather than treating this as false consciousness, a complex realist approach recognises how individualising discourses coexist with, and are often contingent upon, structurally produced suffering.

This thesis will, in its conclusion, argue for a shift in how we conceptualise and respond to mental health in the context of poverty and social marginalisation. It calls for an approach that centres compassion, community, and relational care. Such a reframing not only humanises those who have long been stigmatised but also opens the door to more meaningful and effective forms of support.

Moreover, the findings in this chapter offer yet more criticism of the theories of the ‘precariat’ discussed in the literature review. Standing (2011), Foti (2017), and Savage (2015) all focus solely on economic relations as the context for the emergence of the so-called ‘precariat’, which lacks nuance. My research has found that a lot of people are living precariously (or, in the ‘precariat’) because they have suffered traumatic experiences which have seen them suffer mental health issues. It is these mental health issues which have, ultimately, trapped them in positions of poverty and precarity, as their needs go unmet.

6. Politics and class

“Politics, here we go!” – Tanya

In all 40 of the semi-structured interviews, and both focus groups, participants were asked about their political views and beliefs. The above quote, from Tanya, is from when the topic of politics was first mentioned in one of the focus groups. Tanya’s response could be read as one of enthusiastic excitement, but it was, actually, more a response of apprehension. The topic was not one that the participants felt confident discussing. The overarching theme that came up in these parts of the interviews and focus groups was one of total disillusionment – a detachment from politics and lack of belief in how politicians could use their power to better the lives of those, like themselves, in positions of poverty and precarity.

For context, Bournemouth is divided into two constituencies – Bournemouth East and Bournemouth West. Poole has its own constituency. At the time of the research taking place, all three had only ever been won by the Conservative Party (and so were all of the various constituencies they were created from). However, all three seats became Labour seats at the 2024 General Election, after I had left the field. This is interesting, as, historically, it means that the working-class and/or less-well-off people in Bournemouth and Poole have been politically marginalised, having never been represented in the House of Commons by the Labour Party, which has been intrinsically linked through history with the working-class (although, the strength and effectiveness of this link is very-much debatable).

As discussed in previous chapters, the participants were able to eloquently describe their own individual material reality. For example, they described their personal dealings with welfare providers, the issues within their local communities and the difficulties in keeping themselves or their homes heated during the winter months. However, when it came to ‘Politics’, the overwhelming majority of the participants could not think of any practical political policy that would benefit their lives, when pushed to do so during interviews. While their individual experiences of the welfare state provided some implicit political understandings, they were less able to eloquently discuss politics in a macro sense.

When reviewing the existing literature on political disillusionment, it is not surprising that many of the participants in the study were lacking in political knowledge or interest. It has become the consensus view of academics in this area that policy convergence, whereby the Labour Party have adopted the Conservative Party's economic ideals of neoliberalism, has created a lack of choice, therefore people are less willing to vote in the interest of their class (Evans & Tilley 2017). We are in an era of post-democracy, whereby the lack of choice in mainstream politics has discouraged people from actively participating in politics (Crouch 2020). Evans & Tilley (2017) argue that, if people do not *like* the party they have previously voted for, they have three options: vote for the opposing party, vote for a new party, or don't vote at all. Their research found that the poorer sections of British society are most likely to choose the third option: "If it is not possible for me to express my identity or preferences because no parties represent that identity of preference, then why would I vote?" (ibid.: 175). Evans & Tilley's research also points to the habitual nature of voting and non-voting – so this trend of political disengagement could last for a long time if both of the main parties maintain similar policy positions.

After a thematic analysis of the data, the theme of political disillusionment was broken down into four sub-themes, which structure this chapter. The first sub-theme focuses on how a broadly neoliberal-individualised society has created a disconnect between political participation and the individuals in the study. This section will also provide more of an overview of the literature on how policy convergence has created a lot of non-voters, who do not participate in politics. A second sub-theme is a lack of self-belief resulting from education levels and status, which meant that many of the participants felt underqualified and/or not intelligent enough to engage in discussions of politics, to the extent that they were unworthy of even having political viewpoints at all. In this section, Bourdieu's conception of habitus and cultural capital, discussed previously in the literature review, will be utilised and reflected on. Thirdly, all of the participants displayed a lack of trust in politicians in general. Fourthly, and strongly linked to the third theme, participants did not feel that they are *represented* by politicians. To end this chapter, I consider the responses to the last question I asked in all semi-structured interviews: "what class are you?"

6.1 Policy convergence and neoliberal individualism

As discussed in the literature review, neoliberalism and Thatcherism were hugely influential on the changing of the British class structure (Evans & Tilley 2017), with proponent theorists of a precariat class arguing it was vital in the creation of the so-called class.

Thatcher's time in office saw the creation of the 'great middle mass' and, "A diffuse, mutable language of 'ordinariness', hard-working respectability and family centred individualism was mobilised to describe these people." (Lawrence & Sutcliffe-Braithwaite 2012: 134). Before then, the working-class had been believed to be the biggest class in terms of number of individuals, but since has been ousted in favour of this 'great middle mass' – or, in other words, a dominant middle class. An example of how Thatcher managed to change the narrative was her 'Right to Buy' scheme, which saw former council tenants become homeowners (discussed in Chapter 2). Lilleker (2002: 72) argues that: "The newly empowered homeowners rejected the notion of community and class interest and embraced Thatcherite individualism." The previously dominant working-class, whose votes the main parties competed over, were systematically marginalised from political narratives, both in the media and in the language used by parties (Evans & Tilley 2017).

The idea that most people are now middle-class has been contested by Evans & Tilley (2017), who found that 60% of people still identify with being working-class when prompted to choose between working- and middle-class. However, the authors also note that, despite their findings, the narrative of a dominant middle-class has been widespread in the media and in party politics, to such an extent that class consciousness and class-voting among the working-class has diminished. Moreover, the changing labour market has reduced the opportunities for working-class people to take a traditionally working-class route into politics, via trade union activism, allowing middle-class career politicians to join the old Etonian types as the typical figure of a politician in Britain.

The Conservative Party's desire to destroy class-based voting and politics was adopted by Labour, under Tony Blair, who famously claimed 'we are all middle class now': "It was easy [for New Labour] to make the excuse that the working class no longer existed, whereas in reality it had merely made the transition from relatively secure industrial work to insecure

service work, and it was thus no longer visible in large moving crowds outside shipyard gates.” (Winlow & Hall 2023: 28). As Blair accepted the economics of neoliberalism, the ideological lines between Labour and the Conservatives blurred. Heath (2016: 1054) argues this was damaging for working-class political participation: “When there are clear ideological differences between the parties there is greater incentive to vote than when there are only minor differences, in which case it does not matter so much which party wins.” Moreover, the Labour Party not only accepted neoliberal economics but changed its own image, with membership and representatives from middle-class backgrounds increasing to the point where they are now the majority within the party itself (Winlow & Hall 2023).

In tandem with the working-class being diminished and dismissed by both main parties in Parliament, collectivism has been replaced by individualism. Barry (1989: 145) wrote that, “What marks liberal individualists of all kinds is a distaste, accounting in some cases to detestation, of politics.” – This ‘detestation’ extends to collectivist political ideals, which had been so prominent in post-war Britain. Neoliberals want a small state, where individual families are encouraged/forced to fend for themselves, rather than the traditional safety-net of the welfare state. By the late-1990s, “Capitalism had become the only game in town.” (Winlow, Hall & Treadwell 2017: 13) – and the neoliberal capitalist system, with its hyper-focus on the individual, became the norm. What’s more, it was accepted by large parts of the working-class. Thatcher’s government offered the working-class a different set of aspirations (e.g., homeownership), and today individualism has been normalised to such an extent that even those who are reliant on the welfare state are not necessarily fans of collective responsibility.

The tendency towards individualism was reflected in the interview findings. For example, Maria stated that:

Maria: “I like the fact that individuals are responsible for themselves, at the end of the day. I don’t like the state being so nanny-*ish*, even though I take advantage of it, yeah, I’m a hypocrite, politically.”

It is important to note that Maria's statement above was not typical of the language used by participants. Her use of the term 'nanny-ish' displayed that her political vocabulary was more nuanced than most of the participants. However, it was typical of the lack of desire for more collectivist political principles that the vast majority of participants felt, or even a belief that such collectivism was an option. Evans & Tilley (2017: 9) refer to this as 'social dissolution', "[...] a process of individualisation, where society is composed of individuals whose identities and interests are so multi-layered as to render social categories redundant." This will be reflected on towards the end of this chapter, when focusing on class, where we find that class, as a social identity, was not very significant to any of the participants.

Carla's statement below also reflects a belief that individuals should take more responsibility for themselves, and be less reliant on the state:

Carla: "I also agree that people may need to take some more responsibility for themselves, and not expect so much. Or, helplessness, people have got used to it, you know, the benefits culture or relying on handouts. It's a lifestyle choice for some."

Both Maria and Carla work part-time, but also rely on Universal Credit in addition to their paid work. They both display frustration at those in their communities who have no paid work. This is not surprising. The work of Shildrick, MacDonald, Webster and Garthwaite (2012: 1) highlights how this narrative has become commonplace:

"We live in a period and in a country where an 'old libel' has returned with force, is repeated as fact and is too little challenged: the poor are so because of their own failings – their weakness of morals and character, their fecklessness and idleness, their culture and ways of life."

Their research found no evidence that idleness and a so-called 'benefits culture' exists, but that the narrative of such a culture was commonplace. The same can be said of my research. The

only interviewees who were reluctant or dismissive of the idea of finding employment were people with extenuating circumstances, such as drug addictions or long-term illnesses.

The hegemonic nature of neoliberal capitalism has created what Crouch (2020: 39) refers to as an era of ‘post-democracy’: “[...] where all the forms of democracy continue, including importantly the rule of law, but where the electorate has become passive, not engaging in disturbing activism, and not generating a civil society vibrant enough to produce awkward counter-lobbies that try to rival the quiet work of business interests in the corridors of government.” The findings of my research certainly reflected Crouch’s theory, with the participants somewhat accepting of their fate and remaining marginalised, politically.

However, despite the findings above, when discussing the future with one of the focus groups, they were both disillusioned with the Conservatives and seemed to be somewhat hopeful that Labour, under Keir Starmer, would represent them more:

Researcher: “What do you think of the Conservatives?”

Kevin: “Well, they’ve been in power 13 years, and they just seem to be going round and round in circles, erm... they’re undoing what they done at the beginning and it’s just a shambles.”

Tanya: “Well, MPs are only the speakers for the people, but they’re not speaking for the people anymore.”

Kevin: “They’ve spent all these millions on HS2 and now it’s not gonna do what it’s supposed to do... they’ve just wasted money. They’re trying to fix the NHS’s computer system, but that don’t even work, they’re just... how many more failures do you want from them? It’s time they went, it’s just a joke.”

Carla: “I would say the Conservatives, they don’t relate to me, I can’t relate to them, they look out for themselves always, it’s their club, their boys club.”

Researcher: “What about the Labour Party?”

Kevin: “He’s [Starmer’s] alright.”

Carla: “He talks a lot of sense, he really does.”

Tanya: “I think he’s more for the people.”

Could it be the case that, after 14 years of Conservative government, the Labour Party are beginning to win back some class-based voting? Keir Starmer has been openly mocked for repeatedly describing himself as working-class – “my father was a toolmaker” being used as a tagline for this. But, given the ongoing significance of working-class identity (Evans & Tilley 2017), Starmer’s focus on his working-class roots may be a shrewd move in winning back non-voters. As will be shown later in this chapter, people lower down the socio-economic scale are desperate for representatives who share a similar background to themselves. However, I must note that since leaving the field, and now a year into Starmer’s time as Prime Minister at the time of writing, the narratives surrounding him are particularly negative and he is not a popular figure – with 69% of the public viewing him unfavourably (YouGov 2025).

6.2 Lack of self-belief in education and status

A significant theme that emerged in relation to why the participants lacked political engagement was their lack of self-belief. And this theme could be broken into two further sub-themes: (1) a lack of belief in one's education and, (2) a lack of belief in one's status.

Shaun: "I'm pretty dumb, I don't know anything about stuff like that. I'm interested in it, but I don't know anything."

Emily: "I don't know about any of that."

These quotes from Shaun and Emily were typical of the responses received when first asked about politics. Two of the 40 participants had undergraduate degrees, but the majority had no formal qualifications whatsoever. Persson (2013) argues that education level affects an individual's political participation, not only their views (*see also* Gallego 2007). However, this is a relatively new phenomenon. Before the 1990s, the lesser-educated working-class exercised their votes to a similar extent as their middle-class counterparts. It was not until Labour adopted neoliberalism that non-voting emerged more prominently within the working class (Evans & Tilley 2017).

Theory of cultural capital posits that individuals acquire cultural capital through both their socialisation and education. In the context of education, Bourdieu argued that individuals from higher social classes have greater access to cultural capital, which includes political knowledge, among many other forms of knowledge. This advantage allows them to navigate politics more effectively. Unlike those from the higher social classes, most of the participants in this study lacked any formal political education, which helps to explain why the majority of the participants were lacking in confidence when asked about their political opinions.

Another reason for the participants' lack of confidence when discussing politics was a lack of belief associated with their own status. They did not see themselves as people *worthy*

of having strong opinions, or as people who would be listened to within their communities. The below quote from Brad reflects this:

Brad: “Nah, I don’t deal with all that.”

Researcher: “Why not?”

Brad: “I just don’t have enough of a say, know what I mean? I’m not enough of a person to have a say... you gotta be a major part of the community to have a say, ain’t ya, really?”

The implications of this perceived lack of status, can be viewed through Bourdieu’s (1965: 5) notion of the habitus and how the participants did not see themselves as worthy of having a say in politics: “The class habitus is nothing but this experience (in its most usual sense) which immediately reveals a hope or an ambition as reasonable or unreasonable, a particular commodity as accessible or inaccessible, a particular action as suitable or unsuitable.” Therefore, many of the participants seemed to believe that political participation was unsuitable and that having political ambitions or a role in politics was unreasonable for themselves. In this respect their habitus created barriers to their involvement in politics by shaping their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours in ways that limit their access to political participation and engagement.

The following quote indicates how participants’ perception of their status within their community and society at-large have affected their desire to participate in politics:

Martha: “I’m not gonna lie, I feel like with the news and politics and stuff a lot if it is out of my hands... I don’t really watch the news... I’m not saying I don’t bother with politics but I don’t stress about it because there’s not a lot I feel like I can do.”

This feeling of powerlessness and, therefore, a disassociation from politics highlights an issue with Standing's (2011) ideological original conception of the precariat. Before engaging with Standing's (2011) conceptualisation of the precariat, it is important to clarify the relationship between the analytical frameworks used in this study. While Savage's (2015) work informed the sampling strategy and descriptive categorisation of participants, Standing's precariat is engaged here as a theoretical construct rather than an organising empirical category. This distinction allows Standing's framework to be critically assessed against participants' lived experiences, rather than assumed as an accurate or settled description of their social position. Standing would argue that the participants in my study are 'atavists', a subsection of the precariat. Standing argued that these 'atavists' rely on another subsection of the precariat – the 'progressives' – to be the political drivers of the precariat, as a class. However, very few of the participants in this research have been politicised or politically educated by the so-called 'progressives', who Standing argues are the most important subsection. These 'progressives' (well-educated university graduates with technological cultural capital) are meant, according to Standing, to be educating and politicising the whole of the precariat. But, in practise, there is no evidence from this study that this process has been happening at all.

Even Ernie, who recognises the importance of politics, is not actively engaged with politics:

Ernie: "I'm not about that, I don't vote, no, no, no. But, politics is in every part of life, innit, you know? In every ting, every ting you do."

Whilst Brendan stated:

Brendan: "I don't have much trust in politics and politicians. Sometimes I wonder if they could do more to help, you know. Other times I think it doesn't really concern me

because, erm, the, erm... the benefits system is set up already and is running on its own without their help if you take my meaning.”

Researcher: “So, you wouldn’t vote in an election?”

Brendan: “No, I wouldn’t bother, it wouldn’t really concern me.”

As a street-homeless individual, I would argue that Brendan would benefit from major political changes. Yet, he sees it as not ‘concerning’ him – he is too detached from politics, in a general sense, despite political policies having such a direct impact on his own life. The same goes for Terry, another street-homeless man, who doesn’t have any belief or faith that a politician of political action could affect his life at all:

Terry: “I don’t have any political views because it’s been 20 years now mate. I haven’t seen a television, I really don’t give a shit, there’s no politician or anyone that can say anything to affect my life.”

Gallego (2007: 13) argues that, “[...] dissatisfaction with one’s own employment situation can lead to political radicalisation or to a withdrawal of political activity due to political frustration and apathy as well as a low sense of political efficacy.” However, none of the participants seem to have been radicalised by their situation. Instead, nearly all of them were either completely disillusioned with politics or had no real change in their participation and remained disengaged.

6.3 Lack of trust/faith in politicians

There was not only a lack of belief in their own knowledge and status that prevented many of the participants from being politically active, but they also had no faith in politicians to enact any substantial changes that would benefit them. The following extract from a focus group illustrates the overwhelming perception of politicians heard throughout this study:

Researcher: “What do you think of politicians?”

Kyle: “All the same.”

Tommy: “They’re all liars.”

Frank: “They’re all liars, man.”

Tommy: “And, they’ll promise this, promise that, get into power and do nothing.”

Kyle: “Labour and Tories as bad as each other.”

Researcher: “What’s wrong with politicians?”

Thomas: “Because they’re greedy, that’s what it is.”

Tommy: “They need to put themselves last, rather than living the high life.”

Thomas: “They’re too detached from reality.”

Kyle: “Cut their wages.”

All of the men quoted above were met at a local organisation serving free meals and support to the homeless community. They are some of the most in-need people in society, but, clearly, politicians are failing to gain their support or faith.

A lack of trust in politicians is not a new phenomenon. It was exemplified in 2009, with the parliamentary expenses scandal, which saw trust in politicians plummet from an already low position (Pattie & Johnston 2021). Despite the scandal coming-to-light 15 years ago, it was still mentioned in a few of the semi-structured interviews, and many of the quotes in the remainder of this chapter highlight the ongoing distrust in politicians. However, the expenses scandal was an issue of integrity rather than authenticity, and Valgarðsson (2021: 872) argues that poorer citizens value authenticity more and that those “[...] who place a high value on authenticity are more likely to express political distrust [...]”. This is illustrated by this quote from Simon:

Simon: “I like Boris Johnson because he’s an idiot but he speaks his mind, he doesn’t butter it up with other things, he tell the truth, well... he doesn’t always tell the truth but he says what he thinks and I think more politicians should be open and honest, you know, not try and tell everyone what they want to hear.”

This example of Boris Johnson is interesting as he was perceived to be authentic. However, he did not come into conversation a great deal during the semi-structured interviews. The significance of authenticity in general is, though, a key finding across the participants.

The following quotes from the semi-structured interviews highlight how politicians are viewed by the participants:

Kelly: “They’re all liars, can’t trust a word any of them say, so what’s the point in giving a toss? Like, if they’re gonna fuck the country up, they’re gonna fuck the country up... it don’t make a difference.”

Harry: “I think they’re all as bad as each other, to be honest, I think they’re all as bad as each other. I’ve never voted in my life... honestly, all as bad as each other... it’s tryna pick the lesser evil, innit.”

Darren: “They don’t care about changing anything, the whole system needs to change. Until then, I won’t be voting for any of ‘em.”

Simon: “I hate politics, I think it’s all a load of rubbish. They’re all out for themselves, none of them have ever lived on the poverty-line and understand what it’s like to struggle because they’re politicians, they’ve always got money, you know. Look at Sunak, he’s a millionaire, what’s he ever gonna know about being struggling for money, finding food for kids and feeding them every day. They’re never gonna understand, because they always have money. MPs never understand what the real world’s like because they’ve got money to fall back on and never feel the pinch like normal people do. They’re politicians, they tell you bullshit just so they get your vote.”

Aaron: “My political views now, I just don’t give a shit, I don’t care, none of them give a shit about anybody apart from money and their own pockets, they just don’t care about nothing, it’s all money, money, money.”

Jack: “Regarding politics, I don’t listen to anything, it’s all lies... and, you never get a straight answer. You can’t get a yes or no answer in politics, to be honest.”

Steve: “I’ve never really voted or nothin’ like that, it doesn’t really matter to me who’s in power, who isn’t in power, they all do the same thing.”

Sam: “I’m not political but I do believe that we need to scrap the whole government and start afresh as society.” “Labour, Conservative, Democrats, don’t matter what they are, mate... you can’t undo what’s been done, and... they’ve already screwed up the system so everybody else is just gonna make it worse.” What do you think of politicians? “They don’t represent much of anything... apart from money, power and the right to turn around and go ‘sod you’.”

The above quotes display that not only is there a strong lack of trust in politicians, but that ‘politicians’ are all lumped in together, as a political class. Participants did not discuss the differences between Labour MPs and Conservative MPs unless pushed, and even then, participants were reluctant to distinguish between them, illustrating strong parallels with Crouch’s (2020) notion of post-democracy. The two main political parties were seen to offer nothing different, with the same broad economic stance, leaving people feeling a sense of hopelessness and disassociation from politics in general, not just one party or the other.

In this respect, Valgarðsson (2021) claims the narrative of the existence of a ‘political class’ is based on three claims:

- Characteristic homogeneity (political elites all come from similar backgrounds)
- Attitudinal homogeneity (political elites all have similar beliefs)
- Behavioural homogeneity (political elites all act similarly)

A lack of trust in politicians has been blamed by some as the reason for voter apathy (*see* Fieschi and Heywood 2004). However, where this lack of trust comes from is a complex picture. Many participants seemed to have lost faith in politicians due to a perceived unfairness they have experienced, as the following quote illustrates:

Matthew: “We’re such a small country with such a high population but there’s no support. I worked 10 years, paid tax all my life, spent one year homeless, try to get a house and they won’t give me a house, they won’t help me out – it’s bollocks. So, what should I do, go smoke crack or heroin?”

Matthew, who comes from circumstances that perhaps every current MP would find difficult to relate to, has become apathetic to politics due to the unfairness of a broken and stripped welfare system, where 10 years of tax-paying does not insulate him from destitution and street-homelessness, even without a drug addiction, like a lot of his fellow homeless people.

Reflecting on the actions of politicians, Tanya highlights the unfairness associated with different social positions and the associated benefits, or lack of these:

Tanya: “They’re awful. Why? What, they can go into their canteen and they can get a three-course meal with wine for the same price as we deliver all our food to our children, excuse me? What, you get paid to travel? What, they’ll pay you to have a second home in London? They’ll pay you, you don’t even have to turn up, you can walk, attend, and walk off, you know, just what are we doing?”

Moreover, the following quote from Corinne alludes to a breaking the social contract between the electorate and the elected:

Corinne: “The government are all for themselves, they’re not for the people. When the government is supposed to be for their people and supposed to listen to what we have to say, their supposed to be working for us, not the other way around.”

Becky echoed this sentiment:

Becky: “They don’t listen to people... that’s what I think... because, obviously they are there for their own agenda, but they’re meant to represent us.”

There was a sense that self-interest based on finances is to blame for the ways politicians act, with many participants discussing money in their criticisms of politicians:

Mark: “I wouldn’t vote for these money-grabbing toerags. Politicians at the very top, they’re all in it for personal gain. When you can have politicians claiming for duck houses and moats and this-that-and-the-other, the whole system is wrong. We have got to really rethink because you get corruption, they’re not open, they’re not honest.”

This demonstrates the strong views held by participants about the self-interest of politicians and that they were in it for the money. The arguments about money ruling politics would be found in university lecture theatres up-and-down the country. However, rather than motivating a class-consciousness and attempting to challenge this state of affairs, the participants in this study have reached a state of hopelessness. This is capitalists’ ‘preferred regime’ (*as described/theorised by Crouch 2020*) in action.

There were some other concerns that were not as common in the interviews but are worth noting. For example, Ben lacked trust in the government in the new cyber age, where he is weary of his activities being tracked:

Ben: “Like, I just don’t trust anyone. We live in this system, yeah, where from when you’re born you’ve got a name. And that name is like you not having any freedom. They can track everything you do.”

And Malik, A Syrian immigrant who knows all-too-well the dangers of politics:

Researcher: “Are you interested in politics?”

Malik: “No.”

Researcher: “Why not?”

Malik: “I don’t like politics, it’s dangerous.”

Researcher: “Is that based on your experiences back home?”

Malik: “Yeah, I’ve lived with it, I don’t know what we are gaining from politics.”

However, despite all these criticisms of politicians, practical changes that could create a fairer system were hard to come by. The participants did not like politicians but did not have many ideas for what they would practically change. However, Darren offered a good suggestion:

Darren: “No, can’t stand all them politicians. They say one thing to get into power then do another. They’re legally allowed to lie. Then with all their expenses they can get a second home in London that costs loads of money. They get loads of benefits. Why

can't the government just buy a big block of flats for them all to live in when they're in London? It would be simple, they could all stay there when they're in London, and then it would stop them wasting loads of money."

Whilst this suggestion may not be popular amongst MPs, it is an example of how the unfairness felt by people in positions of poverty could, potentially, be addressed.

6.4 Lack of authentic representation

Shaun: "I feel like just because... from what I see of it, it's just a lot of people in shirts and ties that have no... they can't relate to any of this shite."

As discussed in the previous section, all of the participants had a lack of trust in politicians, in a general sense, but many could not describe any practical changes they wished to see. The lack of representation by politicians was a recurring theme in the interviews and was highlighted as the main reason for a lack of trust in politicians and the political class. As the above quote from Shaun highlights, politicians don't dress like the participants. Moreover, they don't talk like them:

George: "I've been to parliament and sat and watched and I haven't got a clue what they're talking about most the time... they've got their own language."

What is interesting to note about the two quotes, is that Shaun is homeless and has no qualifications, whereas George was one of only two participants in the study who had attended university and previously held relatively stable jobs. Yet, both of them are in agreement that there is a stark divide between themselves and politicians.

Campbell and Cowley's (2014) study found that working-class voters react negatively to financial success, so it was unsurprising that many participants disliked the fact that MPs earn a considerable wage and often have second jobs:

Mark: "Yes, you should be paid to do the job. You shouldn't be allowed a second job. It's all about money, it's not about looking after Joe Bloggs walking down the street. When they say they're gonna be open and clear with people, just do it, because once you say you're gonna do that and don't do it you're just a liar."

The image of a 'career politician' is a relatively new phenomenon, which has seen politicians become increasingly detached from ordinary voters (Heath 2016). While the term 'career politician' is often used descriptively, it also reflects a deeper sociological shift in political recruitment and class composition. Rather than emerging organically from working-class movements, contemporary politicians are increasingly drawn from professionalised career pathways – often involving elite education, party internships, think tanks, and advisory roles prior to holding elected office. This process has narrowed the social base of political representation, embedding politics more firmly within middle-class and elite occupational trajectories, and reinforcing the perception of politics as a closed social field. This has not created a wholly new class divide, but rather transformed how longstanding class inequalities are politically expressed. Whereas the middle-class are seeing an increase in their representation, particularly in the Labour Party, the working-class are seeing a decrease: "Whereas half of the 1945 Labour cabinet had previously held working class jobs, when Labour entered office in 1997 there was just one cabinet minister who previously had a working class occupation." (Evans & Tilley 2017: 127). This suggests that the traditional class divide – once structured around partisan alignment – is increasingly rearticulated as a divide over political participation itself, with disengagement reflecting structural exclusion rather than simple apathy. (Heath 2016). This view is echoed by Crouch (2020: 118-9): "Most people are not highly political and usually feel remote from what goes on in parliaments and local council chambers." In this sense, post-democracy does not signal the disappearance of class politics, but its insulation from formal democratic channels, as political power becomes increasingly

concentrated among socially similar elites despite widening material inequalities. As part of Crouch's theory that we are in a post-democratic era, he recognises a decline in electoral participation as a decline in any ability to recognise what different politicians represent. For example, the line between Conservative and Labour has become so blurred that politicians from the two parties are now often considered one-and-the-same. They are not experienced as Conservative or Labour politicians, but as 'politicians' – a relatively homogenous group of elites whose social trajectories, cultural capital, and material security are far removed from the lives of those experiencing precarity and poverty.

The main reason that the participants did not trust politicians was because they didn't believe that politicians *represent* them. They don't look or talk like them, they don't come from the same socioeconomic backgrounds. As indicated by following quotes:

Frankie: "I don't think they should all come from Eton, at least the ones in the Houses of Parliament... there's definitely a lot coming from the same pool of people."

Darren: "Just being a normal person. A person who's been to prison or had mental health problems, or comes from a normal background. I'd vote for someone if they was normal but they aren't. You wouldn't see one of them in a place like this."

The following exchange with Hayley, similarly only offered one solution to the current political climate: for politicians to actually try living like those on her estate.

Researcher: "What are your political beliefs?"

Hayley: "I don't have any... No, I look at that lot and think 'what a load of crap'. I don't think I'll be voting."

Researcher: “What could a politician do to win your vote?”

Hayley: “Come down and live in [name of Hayley’s estate] for a month, and actually see what it’s like.”

Many participants struggled to come up with ways that could increase the representation of people like them in politics, but many echoed Hayley’s quote above, saying they would like for politicians to come and live like them:

Clare: “I think that they’ve got to take a step in reality. I would love to see them coming down to our level and living a day or, you know, come and be a volunteer at a community centre, something like that, see how busy it is, erm... you know, come and have a look.”

It was also evidenced in one of the focus groups:

Researcher: “What could politicians in London do to help people in Bournemouth?”

Carla: “I’d like to see more representation of the people who live in the areas, so they can relate and make policy from people that are actually living it, with experience.”

Tanya: “I don’t understand why we have a white-collar politician; I think we need more grounded politicians that have more experience, have families with, you know, autistic children that don’t have all the money for a nanny and stuff and understand the struggles that people face.”

Kevin: “Politicians need to get out of the Houses of Parliament, come into the real world, and experience what we go through day-to-day, and get a total perspective on it, because they’re in their ivory tower and they’re not in the real world.”

Charlie: “I mean, I’d like to see how they’d get on if they was given a food voucher.”

Tanya: “Go live in a flat for six months, go live on £80 a week and try heat yourself and feed yourself and keep mentally well. Go do that for six months and then make some policies.”

The labour movement used to offer traditional routes from trade union activism into politics. However, the changing labour market and the Labour Party’s shift towards accommodating the middle-class, make it unlikely that the representation of ordinary people will change in politics any time soon. However, the findings above suggest that politicians coming from backgrounds more representative of the participants and/or living in, or at least experiencing, the conditions of those in the positions of precarity would go a long way to enhancing the trust that the participants in this study have in politicians. Moreover, it could inculcate in their habitus that political participation was something for them.

6.5 Summary

In summary, this chapter so far has underscored the profound sense of political disconnection experienced by participants living in poverty and precarity. While participants were deeply aware of their local realities and personal hardships, they largely felt unequipped, or unentitled, to engage in political discourse. Rather than identifying with specific policies or parties, many focused their discussions on politicians themselves, often expressing deep-seated mistrust and cynicism. This detachment was rooted not in apathy, but in a broader sense of exclusion. They feel overlooked and unheard by a political system that appears distant and alien.

Although participants frequently described themselves as ‘not political’, their accounts were saturated with political judgments, grievances, and evaluations of state power. From a complex realist standpoint, this apparent contradiction highlights the distinction between formal political identity and lived political experience. Participants were not disengaged from politics as a social reality, but from politics as an institutionalised, middle-class field requiring cultural capital. Their narratives reveal political alienation rather than political absence and are considered here to be contingent upon the local and national context in which they emerge.

The influence of neoliberalism has entrenched this alienation, shaping attitudes around self-reliance while eroding collective understandings of class and solidarity. Participants often internalised individualistic narratives, distancing themselves from others in similar positions and echoing forms of stigma rooted in broader political rhetoric. Their hesitation to speak about politics, paired with the belief that they lacked the knowledge or authority to do so, reflects the lasting effects of a system that has systematically devalued their voices.

Yet, even within this disillusionment, a faint hope persists. Some participants expressed cautious optimism that Labour, under new leadership, might offer a more representative and empathetic political vision. However, this hope remains uncertain and fragile (and, at the time of writing, unfulfilled). What is clear from this study is that, for many, politics is not a space of possibility, but of disappointment – one that has failed to reflect or respond to their lived realities. To re-engage these communities, politics must move beyond abstract policies and party lines, and make a consolidated effort to promote people from working-class communities into positions of power. This argument will be developed more in the discussion chapter.

However, one separate area of political understanding developed in this research has not yet been touched upon: class. As discussed previously, Evans and Tilley (2017) are hopeful that a working-class consciousness will develop, with their findings that the majority of people in the UK still resonate with the term ‘working class’. I wanted to test this with my participants, by asking them one question to round-off each semi-structured interview: “what class are you?”

6.6 Class politics

Ernie: “What do you mean?”

Participants were encouraged to answer with whatever came to mind, and this produced a small amount of data, but data that is very significant for a contemporary understanding of class identity.

6.6.1 What is a class?

What is a class? This way of stratifying people has been commonplace in Britain since the industrial revolution. Britain’s class structure, as well as British peoples’ obsession with it, is recognised by people looking in from the rest of the world – with every public display of the monarchy epitomising how entrenched class differences and inequalities remain (Cannadine 2000).

Answering, ‘what is a class?’, half-a-century ago, may have been easier, when manual labour still dominated industry and thriving working-class communities were creating and celebrating distinct cultures (Lawrence 2013). But, for all the reasons discussed by proponents of the precariat theory (deindustrialisation, consumerism, globalisation etc.), working-class culture has become less distinct, less visible, less celebrated, and, less homogenous (Entin 2021). Now, theories of class, often linked to Bourdieu’s understanding of capital and *habitus*, give recognition to where class is practiced in all aspects of life, like home and school, rather than simply the workplace. Also, theories of class are now more likely to recognise how class intersects with race, gender and ethnicity (Entin 2021), and other forms of identity.

The previous sections of this chapter displayed the lack of political opinions and understandings held by the participants. The rest of this chapter displays the failure of participants to recognise their class identity or to exhibit any class consciousness. Corinnes quote, below, is an example of this:

Corinne: “Me? I wouldn’t say I’m working class, I’m like everyone else, I’m on breadline.”

While Corinne is clearly able to articulate her situation, and even that she is like ‘everyone else’, she has not adopted a language of class to describe her situation. She certainly does not display any class consciousness.

While Corrine could not name her class but instead chose to refer to herself as ‘on breadline’, Tanya named two classes, in her answer:

Tanya: “Lower. Well, lower-to-middle...”

Tanya’s answer, again, runs counter to the predictions of Marxism. Rather than Tanya forming part of a mass proletariat working-class, she feels that she exists in a space between ‘lower’ and ‘middle’.

This thesis argues that an over-complication of class-understandings, by academics, is problematic for class consciousness. Academic discourses around naming social class that are a recognition of oneself as a member of a social class can become convoluted and technical, which may undermine the potential for class consciousness to flourish, inhibiting the potential for the emergence of political action. The following quote displays one of the most fundamental difficulties faced by sociologists when attempting to define social classes – there are an over-abundance of terms and structures to choose from: “It is but a slight exaggeration to say that there have been almost as many theories of class as there have been class analysts observing the phenomenon.” (Marshall, Rose, Newby and Vogler 1988: 13). This is a key argument I am attempting to illuminate in this thesis, through focusing on the precariat. My contention is that the precariat, has utility as a sociological grouping but is not a politically useful term for creating class consciousness. In part this is due to the sheer number of class-theories being put forward and debated by sociologists, which lack relevance for the very-people that they are

being used to describe. Many theorists, including Standing (2011), are hopeful that a class-consciousness will create powerful political ideals and progress the lives of the many. However, with so many different theories of class, it makes this less likely.

This issue was also briefly discussed in the main literature review section of this dissertation, where alternatives to the precariat were discussed – the much-debated ‘*lumpenproletariat*’, the theoretically significant ‘multitude’, and the for-a-time popular ‘underclass’, were just three examples of theories that can be and have been used to describe the participants in this study. While this thesis does not aim to give credence to any of these terms, including the ‘precariat’ itself, there was some evidence from participants to support the idea that such theories are deserving of recognition:

Brad: “That’s a hard one that is... Probably lower class, to be honest with you mate, I live with the homeless, you know what I mean, I don’t have a job right now... I have no say, I’m probably the lowest class going right now.”

Brad did not name a class, but recognised himself as ‘the lowest’, aligning with theorists who have argued that such a ‘low’ class exists, even if this thesis does not support such arguments. Instead, I argue that Brad’s reluctance to recognise himself as a member of the working-class may be due to the neglect of social scientists and the political left in utilising traditional language of class to make people, like Brad, feel included in the working-class.

Frankie’s answer to the question about what class they are is a good example of the confusion that exists in understandings of class:

Frankie: “Am I still working-class if I don’t have a job? I don’t think I’m middle class, I’m not... erm... I don’t think I’m... I guess I’m working class, I’m not in poverty, frankly I have a reasonable time, I’m not out on the streets or anything, but I wouldn’t call myself middle class...”

Frankie's quote, above, offers a good rebuttal of the argument that the term 'working-class' is most apt for describing people in positions like hers, living in precarity, unemployment, and reliant on the welfare state for survival. I would argue that Frankie is working-class, Due to a lack of paid employment, Frankie has been left confused about how to name her own class position. However, I think it should be noted that Frankie *does* work, but as a volunteer at a community fridge that she also utilises. This displays that Frankie does not respect her volunteer work *as work* (and, therefore, her *being* working-class), despite it being of vital importance within her community, where people would go hungry without the community fridge she helps to run. In a neoliberal world, where financial security, profits and paid work are of the utmost importance, people like Frankie under-value their own contribution to their communities to the point where they feel excluded from the working-class.

That being said, the findings from this thesis support the argument that, despite negative associations with the term being presented by some scholars, the term 'working-class', as the most colloquially accepted term, still holds the most power in creating a class consciousness with the strength to create political change. To put it bluntly: all the participants in this research were presented with an information sheet which specifically and briefly described the 'precariat', yet not a single one of them answered that they were in a 'precariat' class when asked the question.

Less than 15 years after Gorz (1982) wrote his *Farewell to the Working Class*, Pakulski and Waters (1996) were proclaiming *The Death of Class*. This period, wherein hooks (2000) made the argument that class was no longer a 'cool' subject within sociology, was discussed in the main literature review. This argument, again, not only caused problems for academics in defining class but with those in positions of precarity, like those being studied, here, who were clearly still seeing the effects of class-inequality, while also being told that class no longer mattered or existed. It was a failure of recognition, by the middle-class academic elite, that class is everywhere, and class does still matter (Reay 1997; Bettencourt 2020).

6.6.2 Class belonging

A lack of class resonance

Matthew: “I’m the class that’s not social.”

Class did not come up spontaneously in any of the interviews and most understandings/*feelings* of class were implicit rather than explicit. This was despite the fact that all participants read an information sheet before their interviews, which clearly stated that this was a study of class – so, they were aware of the research’s interest in class from the outset. Unlike Evans and Tilley’s (2017) research, participants in this study were not given an option of ‘working’ or ‘middle’ – they were encouraged to say whatever came to mind. This did lead to some creative answers, like Shaun for instance:

Shaun: “I’m a graffiti writer, I’m a writer, yeah, I’m a graffiti writer, that’s my social class.”

However, in many cases, the question ‘what class are you?’ seemed alien and strange to the participants, and the following responses were typical:

Barbara: “I don’t know.”

Jake: “What are the options?”

Chris: “What do you mean?”

Harry: “What do you mean?”

Sam: “What do you mean?”

Kelly: “What do you mean?”

I did consider if the question, ‘what class are you?’ was a good interview question, with so many participants struggling to answer it. However, the fact that the participants struggled to answer the question is an interesting finding in itself, which reflects a sense of the lack of belonging among participants in this study. Evans and Tilley (2017) argue that class identity is not the same as class consciousness. However, they are hopeful that, since 60% of the British population resonate with the term ‘working-class’, class awareness is only one step away – meaning that a ‘new politics of class’ is possible, in the 21st century. However, by providing their participants with the options of ‘working’ or ‘middle’, they are creating a false dichotomy in relation to identity as, my research has already displayed, many do not resonate with either term. It begs questions of the legitimacy of their statement that 60% of the population claim to be working-class. If someone needed prompting on potential answers before answering the question ‘what football team do you support?’ you would likely surmise that they were not *really* a fan of that football team.

When participants replied with “what do you mean?”, the follow up was “as in social class” – in an attempt to keep the answers as free from intervention as possible. These were some responses:

Chris: “Standard.”

Ernie: “Well, I’m on a lower class now, innit, I’m on the streets beggin’ my friend, so yeah, that’s low.”

When that was still not sufficient for gaining a response, the follow up was then “well, the most common answers are ‘working’ or ‘middle’, but it’s whatever comes to your mind.” I am aware that, here, I ended up doing exactly what I criticised Evans and Tilley (2017) for doing previously. However, this was considered as a last resort, as these participants were still unable to offer an answer. Moreover, even with this follow up, the responses were still a mixed bag:

Jake: “I’m middle-class, yeah.”

Sam: “I’d like to say working-class, erm... yeah, probably come from working-class.”

Kelly: “Well, I’m not working-class am I, I probably come under the poor. I’m living on benefits, I’m penniless... see, my fella he does burglaries and stuff, so we don’t go penniless, but I don’t want him doing stuff like that...”

As has been displayed by the quotes above, not only did many participants lack class identity, but even when prompted they often did not resonate with the term working-class, despite them all living in relative poverty.

This is another issue with the methods of Evans and Tilley (2017). Allowing people to self-identify is not necessarily the most appropriate way of defining class. Bewick (2020: 268) states that “[...] the way you perceive your own class position does not necessarily equate to the way your class position is read by others.” For example, Jake is a homeless Big Issue seller with a history of drug addiction. Therefore, he would likely not be ‘read’ or *perceived* by others as ‘middle-class’. However, Jake’s father was an architect – a traditionally middle-class profession – and so, Jake had a very middle-class upbringing. So, it is understandable that he

stated he was middle-class. Moreover, his response states that class is more than just current situation or occupation but deeply ingrained in youth and education.

A dismissal of class

The research performed by Evans and Tilley (2017) was likely skewed, as more wealthy people are actually *more* likely to define themselves based on socioeconomic status than those in poverty (*see* Manstead 2018). People in poverty, on the other hand, will define themselves situationally, leading to some describing themselves in derogatory ways:

Simon: “I’m bottom, I’m scum.”

Simon is a gentle man who works part-time in two roles that involve caring for children. He is, from the perspective of this researcher, the opposite of scum. But these were the words that came to his mind when asked what class he is.

There were many respondents who were not bothered or did not care about class:

Becky: “It doesn’t matter to me, it really doesn’t”

Caroline: “Never really thought about it.”

And Harry and John consider class as a system of classification, that they find completely unhelpful:

Harry: “I don’t judge anybody, I don’t think I’m better or worse than anybody, I don’t put myself in a class, we start in this world with nothing, we live with nothing, so nobody’s better than anyone else, you know, I don’t judge anyone whether they’re a prostitute, an addict, or a millionaire, we’re all humans at the end of the day.”

John: “God I hate that.... Yes, nobody should be of a social class, really, anymore, erm... I suppose I’m... I used to be upper-middle... yeah, I think I’m now low low low.”

Unlike many proponents of class in sociology, like myself, who see it as beneficial in creating collectivist political outcomes, Harry and John see it as a tool for division. Again, this reflects the failure of the left to utilise class politically.

More “middle” than “working”

There were a few respondents who identified with being working class:

Annette: “I’m working-class, and I’ve worked and worked and worked and worked... I’m working-class, definitely.”

Steve: “Working-class, yeah, I’d say working-class, not middle-class, not upper-class.”

Jay: “Working-class, I suppose.”

Colin: “I’d say I was working-class. I mean, I had a comfortable childhood but I’ve never had a job that pays anything other than 10-11 pounds-an-hour so it would be silly of me to refer to myself as anything other than working-class.”

But, these were not the norm. In fact, there were more who claimed to be middle-class:

Brendan: “Middle class.”

Aaron: “Erm, I’m middle-class, I believe.”

Jack: “I guess I’m middle-class, really.”

Terry: “Pretentious middle class.”

Brendan, Aaron, Jack and Terry all have something in common – they’re homeless. Their answers support an argument that the term ‘working-class’ is insufficient and exclusionary, as it can be argued that it is the fact that these four men don’t work which is what makes them see themselves as non-working-class (*see* Hardt & Negri 2004: 106). However, in the literature review, many alternatives were discussed as well as, of course, the precariat itself. Why did all of these participants not resonate with any alternative sociological theories as to what class they belonged to? Why did none of them say they were in the ‘precariat’ class? Standing’s (2011) original conception relies on the ‘progressives’ within the precariat acting as the vanguard of the class, the educators of the ‘atavists’. But, over a decade after his book was published this has not been displayed in the form of any class consciousness amongst participants in this study.

George’s attempt to answer the question of what class he is, displays that there is an underlying understanding that class is not purely associated with economic position:

George: “What class am I? If I were to class myself, which I don’t know, I’d be classed as middle-class I think, because we’re not rich enough to be... but... we haven’t got huge amounts of money and income coming in, but... erm...”

George is wrestling with the fact that he has a quintessentially middle-class upbringing, but now finds himself utilising food banks for survival. He holds the cultural capital associated with being middle-class, but his economic capital does not align with that same class.

Simon: “I just live every day as I can, you know, I’m not middle class, there’s no way I can afford to be middle class, but I just take each day as it comes and enjoy life. I sing a lot, you know, and, you know, survive.”

Simon’s quote, above, is an interesting insight into how class is viewed, both by the participants in this research, and through a Bourdieuan theoretical lens. Somewhere in his habitus, Simon’s mind associates his love for singing with his class, when asked ‘what class are you?’. This unique answer demonstrates that class is not viewed through a strict Marxist lens, where one’s relationship to the means of production is the be-all and end-all. Class has different and unique meanings to everyone, even if we, as sociologists, are more-often concerned by the shared habitus and the symbolic power of accumulated capitals.

6.6.3 Conclusion on class

In conclusion, this chapter displays that while academic theories of class, such as the precariat, aim to capture the changing dynamics of social stratification, they often fail to resonate with the people they are intended to describe. The gap between academic discourse and lived experience was made especially clear when participants did not identify with the term

‘precariat’, despite being introduced to it during the research. Instead of fostering collective identity or political consciousness, such terminology risks alienating individuals further, contributing to confusion rather than clarity.

Participants’ difficulty in naming their class position did not indicate the absence of class consciousness. Instead, it reflects a mismatch between academic classifications and lived, relational understandings of class. Complex realism allows these accounts to be understood as expressions of real class relations that are not always symbolically available or linguistically articulated.

This study argues that sociological language must be grounded in the realities and vocabularies of those it seeks to represent. Constantly redefining and renaming class categories may serve academic purposes, but it can obscure the real, everyday struggles of working-class people. Class, as experienced by participants, is not a theoretical construct but a lived reality shaped by economic insecurity, cultural marginalisation, and social fragmentation.

Ultimately, the thesis calls for a more grounded, accessible approach to class analysis – one that honours colloquial understandings and lived experience over abstract theorisation. If class is to remain a meaningful tool for sociological analysis and political mobilisation, it must speak in a language that people understand, and more importantly, one they feel reflects who they are. To be clear, class does not ‘speak’ in any literal sense. Rather, class is articulated through the everyday narratives, moral judgements and self-descriptions of those positioned within particular material and social conditions. In this respect, class ‘speaks’ through lived experience – through how people describe work, insecurity, respectability, shame, belonging and exclusion. These accounts are not merely subjective impressions, but socially patterned expressions shaped by structural position, even when participants do not explicitly name or theorise them as such. This study therefore treats participants’ language not as a failure to understand class, but as an empirical resource through which class relations are expressed, negotiated and sometimes resisted. Moreover, proponents of the use of the term ‘working-class’, like myself, must utilise the term in a way that people who are unemployed still resonate with. It was a surprise to me that, out of the 40 participants, more said they were middle-class than working-class. This, again, displays the disparity between academic understandings of class and non-academic understandings of class.

7. Summary, discussion, conclusion, and reflection

My first research question asked: ‘What is the precariat, and who belongs in it?’ I have made a clear argument throughout this thesis that I believe that the precariat, while being a relevant sociological grouping, is not a class. It is a ‘class on paper’ (see Crossley 2014) – which does not constitute a *real* class. I will reflect on this later in this chapter.

Another of my research questions focused on the lived experience of the precariat. This created a broad discussion of the case study and many issues facing the participants, such as food poverty and an insufficient welfare system. However, this fed into one of the major themes in this thesis around mental health, where the participants’ needs are going unmet. This chapter begins by summarising and critically discussing those findings.

Next, this chapter summarises and critically discusses the findings related to my other research question: what is the politics of the precariat? In this, I discuss disillusionment, a desire for authentic representation and the lack of class-feelings expressed by participants.

Moving on to the conclusions, this chapter discusses future research and summarises the contributions of this research: A comprehensive literature review of the ‘precariat’; illuminating the mental health crisis; an argument for real and authentic representation; and, challenging class theories.

Finally, I end my thesis by reflecting on my research, recognising my feelings of imposter syndrome, my final thoughts on the theory of the precariat, and, lastly, I reflect on politics and my own feelings of disillusionment.

7.1 Summary and discussion

Across the findings chapters, participants’ accounts were often contradictory: critical yet compliant, politicised yet disengaged, structurally constrained yet individually blamed. A

complex realist reading treats these tensions as central to understanding how lived experience emerges in the context of contemporary poverty and precarity. Participants' narratives do not transparently 'reflect' social reality, nor do they merely reproduce ideology; instead, they emerge from the interaction between material conditions and dominant social discourses.

Lived experience

The aim of the lived experience chapter was to provide an overview of how the participants experience everyday life in place. Therefore, the chapter began with a biography of place, focusing on how seaside towns have been affected by deindustrialisation and globalisation, while being often overlooked in sociological discourse regarding the working-class. This thesis argues that this neglect stems from the dominance of urban/industrial imagery in sociological studies of the working-class, as well as popular depictions in culture. Seaside towns, in contrast, are framed as sites of leisure rather than labour, leaving the working-class people in those communities under- and mis- represented. Places like Bournemouth and Poole, for example, are celebrated for their beautiful coastal features, which contributes to the poverty and vulnerability of the residents often being ignored. The literature shows that seaside communities are suffering from precarious employment and poor housing. Therefore, while my case study locations may be perceived as affluent, they are sites where large communities are living in what is describe as 'nested deprivation' (Boswell et al. 2022). Through the development of a biography of place, and the findings of the thesis in general, poverty and precarity co-exist and contradicts the dominant place-based narrative associated with coastal communities.

The biography of place continued by providing brief histories of both Bournemouth and Poole, helping to illustrate the case study. For example, Bournemouth's history as a middle-class resort has contributed to the exclusion of working-class people historically (Edwards 1981; Boudreau & Dodds 1988). In contrast, Poole's history is more aligned with a traditional/industrial working-class imagery, with the town having a community shaped by craft and trade (Guttridge 2004; Cullingford 1988; Hawkins 1980).

Following the biography of place, the chapter focused on how the participants talked about their towns and communities, and what were the major issues. Homelessness, addiction, and crime were the three main points that were covered, with participants feeling that there was a failure by local institutions to deal with such issues. However, the findings also revealed a great sense of appreciation for grass roots community organisations for providing a safety net – as Frank said, “If this place closed down, we’re all fucked.” However, being critical, it is clear to me that the existence and normalisation of these organisations is problematic, as they are only filling gaps left by the retrenchment of the welfare state.

One of the main points of context for the chapter was UC. The chapter highlights how this component of the welfare state has exacerbated insecurity and stigma, as well subjecting claimants to harsh punitive measures. The interviews revealed that many of the participants had experienced high levels of distress due to the impersonal nature of UC and the digitalisation of UC. These findings aligned with existing literature that has critiqued the neoliberal nature of UC and welfare provision in general, as it harms vulnerable people (Brewer, Browne and Jin 2012; Cheetham et al. 2019; Wickham et al. 2022; Millar & Bennett 2017; Machin 2017; Newman 2023). Here, the digitality of welfare is more than a technical barrier. It is a neoliberal attempt to streamline the welfare state, distance the state from recipients, and, to reframe what should be considered rights to a safety net as conditional entitlements.

One of the most noticeable pressures facing participants was food poverty. Moreover, many of the participants were met at foodbanks and community fridges. The existence of these organisations and spaces are strong symbols of a failing welfare state in-action – as has been argued by many other researchers in the field (Garthwaite 2016; Sosenko, Littlewood & Hennigan 2020); Visram & Brown 2020; Lambie-Mumford 2013; Power et al. 2020).

Homelessness was another major theme in the chapter. Homelessness was not a specific theme in the interview schedule and early attempts to find participants for the study did not place a large emphasis on homeless participants. However, through initial interviews and conversations with gatekeepers, it became apparent that homeless participants would be essential for two reasons. Firstly, some of the participants complained about the street homeless people as a major issue in the local area; and, secondly, some of the non-street homeless participants had experienced homelessness or were currently experiencing homeless, despite

their situations being less visible than the street homeless individuals who others discussed when voicing concerns about the local community. This methodological shift displays the importance of a flexible and extendable approach to a case study, as well as the complexity of social research.

The findings on homelessness highlight the complexity of the issue, with the visible/rough-sleeping homeless being the biggest source of discussion. Dominant narratives continue to individualise blame for addiction and deficiencies. These narratives are then internalised by the very people suffering from homelessness and addiction. This thesis highlights that homelessness is often caused by structural issues – such as poor welfare policies, housing insecurity, and poverty – together with individual experiences of trauma and substance use. The accounts from participants illustrate both resilience and agency, as participants were able to build some status (i.e., Kevin’s prison analogy) and normalise hardship. This suggests that homelessness cannot be reduced to either structural factors or individual failings but should be understood through an interplay between agency, trauma, and, but most importantly, systemic inequality.

Mental health

Through discussions regarding the lived experiences of participants, in *present* and in *place*, mental health became *the* dominant theme. The theme allowed the research to look at the *pasts* of the participants, with traumatic life experiences being causal factors in their mental health struggles. While participants emphasised the personal and psychological dimensions of their precarious lives, it is important to recognise that their experiences are inseparable from economic conditions that formed part of this thesis’ sampling criteria. In this way, the analysis can examine how trauma, mental health, and economic precarity intersect, rather than treating them as opposing explanations. This approach allows participants to centre their own narratives of causality while situating those experiences with broader economic realities, offering a more nuanced understanding of precarity and, therefore, the precariat, than purely economic accounts, such as those discussed in chapter 2.

For many of the participants, their childhoods held traumatic experiences that had affected their mental health for years to come, with issues of domestic violence prominent. Unfortunately, many of the female participants who had suffered domestic violence as children were also abused by partners into adulthood. One must be critical, here, of how cycles of abuse are sustained. Institutions, such as social services and the police force, have failed to protect and support many of the participants.

Another major cause of trauma faced by many participants was drugs and drug addiction. Many had grown up with parents suffering from addiction and where addiction was so normalised that they also saw taking drugs as a coping mechanism. These findings highlight an issue with discourses of drug use, which present substance abuse as an individual choice. Instead, the intergenerational nature of addiction should be given recognition.

Also, many of the participants' mental health issues were related to bereavement. The loss of family members, partners and close friends had created deep emotional turmoil – leaving long lasting effects that have exacerbated experiences of precarity. Like Mark, whose PTSD stems from witnessing the death of a colleague, and Carla, who was unable to continue her career as a school teacher after the death of her partner. These cases display how a mental health crisis is often triggered by life events but then compounded by precarity and inequality – a point that can be overlooked if mental health is framed in isolation from socioeconomic factors (even, as this thesis has displayed, by the people suffering from both mental health issues and poverty themselves).

The intersection of these traumatic experiences emphasises the need to reconsider simplistic explanations of precarity that focus solely on neoliberal economic structures. Many of the participants' life trajectories were shaped by childhood trauma – domestic abuse, addiction, bereavement – which led to ongoing mental health issues. As such, the notion of the precariat as merely a product of the precarious job market is inadequate, failing to account for the deep, multifaceted traumas that contribute to individuals' struggles. Ultimately, this research has demonstrated a need for a broader understanding of precarity, one that considers both personal and structural economic factors, as well as the intersecting traumas that shape the lives of those within it.

Individualism permeated semi-structured interviews when discussing mental health, as many participants initially framed their struggles as personal issues, separate from their economic circumstances, and often expressed resistance to formal help and support. This reflects the influence of neoliberal-individualism, where mental health challenges are internalised as personal failings rather than understood in relation to social position. Drawing on Marmot's (2015) conceptualisation of the social gradient (Chapter 5), this thesis recognises that an individual's position in society shapes health outcomes, including mental health. Importantly, when participants engaged in focus groups, discussions collectively highlighted how financial precarity and broader social inequalities exacerbate mental health struggles. This shift demonstrates the strength of the methodology: through collective reflection, participants moved beyond individualised narratives, recognising structural factors that contribute to mental health challenges, and allowing the research to capture a more nuanced understanding of the interaction between economic precarity and psychological wellbeing.

This thesis supports the view that neoliberal-individualism has infiltrated and affected understandings of mental health. In an era of neoliberalism, focus is given to the role of the individual rather than systemic causes of mental distress. In other words, neoliberalism reinforces a medicalised view of mental health, which overlooks broader social factors. This aligns with broader welfare reforms under austerity that have placed growing expectations on individual responsibility for health and well-being regardless of the structural inequalities relating to a person's social position.

When asked about the help given by doctors, many participants talked about talking therapy. However, while some found talking therapy helpful, most deemed it to be ineffective. The same can be said for the medication being prescribed. Some of the participants were relieved to receive medication, while others felt that the medication only exacerbated their problems. Then there were other participants, whose needs were completely unmet – either receiving no support at all or being offered no type of support that they were happy with. These findings reflect the failures of standardised and minimised mental health interventions to recognise the complex needs of those living in positions of poverty and precarity.

The most common and crucial need expressed by participants was simply having people to talk to – a sense of community. James, for example, finds that talking to someone about his

struggles with ADHD and fluctuating moods makes things feel more manageable. However, many participants report a lack of adequate mental health support, citing programs like Steps2Wellbeing, which, despite offering services such as counselling and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, do not fully meet the needs of those experiencing severe or complex mental health issues.

Moreover, the focus group conversations reveal a significant shift towards community-based approaches as a potential alternative. Participants expressed frustration with the formal mental health system – poor advertising of services, long waiting lists, and eligibility barriers all undermined access. The consensus view from the focus groups is that community-based organisations offer a more reliable and supportive environment for maintaining mental health, as opposed to more traditional, medical interventions. Spaces, like community centres and hubs, where I met many of my participants, were the spaces where they were gaining the most support for their mental health issues. Instead of being made to feel better by formal means of medicines and doctors' appointments, it was having a sense of community and belonging which made the participants consider their lives worth living. Charlie, who told me he would have died by suicide if it were not for community centre where we met, is a living example of this. This finding has urgent policy implications: if the powers-that-be want to meaningfully address the mental health crisis, they should invest not only into medical services but into community projects that foster a sense of human connection.

This narrative aligns with Garthwaite's (2016) findings that community-based spaces, like food banks, can provide mental health benefits by fostering social connections and offering a non-judgmental environment where people can talk openly. In both settings, the sense of community is critical in providing emotional support and counteracting isolation, demonstrating that the most effective mental health care may not always come from formal, institutionalised settings but from the supportive relationships and shared experiences found within communities.

Politics and class

Most of the participants treated the topic of politics with apprehension from the outset. This political apprehension cannot be understood solely through class position, but must also be situated within the specific local context of Bournemouth and Poole. As coastal towns shaped by seasonal employment, tourism, low-wage service work and rising housing costs, these locations provide a distinctive lens through which experiences of marginalisation and precarity are lived and understood. Participants' political disengagement was therefore shaped not only by their class position, but by how class is experienced in a place characterised by economic insecurity, limited opportunity and a perceived lack of political visibility. While they were happy to speak about their lives and could easily articulate their experiences, even when discussing traumatic periods of their lives, most were less-than-comfortable speaking about politics. This apprehension came from a fear that they would not be able to discuss politics, as they were not well-enough informed. In the focus groups, the apprehension continued. This can be understood through a Bourdieuan lens of cultural capital. Political conversations are framed as something requiring a high level of cultural capital, which leads to many people in positions of poverty and precarity excluded from political discourse.

It was certainly true that the majority of participants were not very knowledgeable about politics in a general sense. Many could not answer, when asked, what government policies could help to improve the lives of people in poverty and precarity. While they were knowledgeable about local issues and their own circumstances, they seemed distant from the discussions and vocabulary of mainstream political conversations. This points to the distinction between formal political knowledge and more grounded forms of political knowledge. This distinction reflects how classed political knowledge is spatially organised. Participants were often highly attuned to local issues such as housing shortages, policing, drug use, and the availability of support services, yet felt disconnected from national political debates that appeared abstract and geographically distant. In this sense, political disengagement did not stem from apathy, but from a mismatch between the spatial scale at which politics is conducted and the localised nature of participants' everyday struggles.

The overarching theme that emerged from both the interviews and focus groups was a widespread detachment from politics. Participants expressed a lack of faith in politicians and their ability to use their power to improve the lives of those in poverty and precarious situations. For many participants, political detachment was also shaped by a sense that places like Bournemouth and Poole were politically marginal or overlooked. Unlike post-industrial cities that feature more prominently in political discourse, coastal towns were often perceived as invisible within national policy debates. Participants frequently expressed the view that politicians did not understand their local conditions or priorities, reinforcing a sense that political power operated elsewhere. This spatial marginalisation compounded class-based alienation, contributing to a belief that engagement with politics would not lead to meaningful change.

A lack of political engagement is well-documented in existing literature on political disillusionment. Scholars such as Evans & Tilley (2017) argue that policy convergence, where the Labour Party has adopted neoliberal economic policies akin to those of the Conservative Party, has created a situation where people feel they have no real political choice. This has led to political disengagement, especially among the poorer sections of society, who are less likely to vote due to a lack of representation for their class interests. Crouch's (2020) concept of 'post-democracy' further highlights how the electorate has become passive, disengaged, and unresponsive to mainstream political parties. For many participants, the idea of voting or political participation seemed irrelevant in a system they felt did not represent them.

As outlined in the literature review, neoliberal policies since Thatcher, and later reinforced by New Labour, have promoted an individualistic, market-driven ethos, where personal responsibility is prioritised over collective social welfare. This shift has left many working-class individuals feeling politically alienated. This research found that, while some participants still identified with working-class roots, many had internalised individualistic narratives, reflecting a broader cultural trend where the state's role in providing welfare was minimised, and self-reliance was increasingly emphasised. Participants like Maria and Carla expressed frustration with what they perceived as a "benefits culture," associating the unemployed with moral failure or laziness – views that reflect the widespread influence of neoliberal ideology, as both participants were also in receipt of UC. These narratives were often articulated through localised comparisons, with participants contrasting their own situations

with perceived ‘outsiders’ or other neighbourhoods within the town (like the homeless men in the focus group complaining that Bournemouth town centre had better Christmas lights than in Boscombe). In a local economy dominated by low-paid service work and limited upward mobility, individualistic explanations offered a way of making sense of structural insecurity while deflecting attention away from place-based inequalities. In this way, neoliberal ideology was not simply absorbed abstractly, but filtered through the specific economic and social conditions of the local area.

The chapter also explored the participants' low levels of political involvement. Many felt unqualified to engage with politics due to their perceived low educational or social status. This, again, reflects Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus and cultural capital, where individuals from lower social classes may not feel they possess the appropriate tools or confidence to participate in political discourse. This lack of self-belief in their ability to understand or influence political matters left many participants feeling disconnected from the political system.

There was also a widespread lack of trust in politicians. Many participants described a general sense that politicians were not to be trusted, as they seemed more interested in advancing their own careers than representing the needs of the working-class. This mistrust is not unique to this study but is consistent with the broader trend of declining trust in political elites, which has been exacerbated by a series of scandals and perceived failures.

Finally, the participants', in general, had a strong sense of political alienation, feeling unrepresented by the political class. Many expressed frustration that neither the Labour Party nor the Conservative Party truly represented their interests. This lack of political representation is compounded by the ongoing shifts in political narratives, where class-based issues have been side-lined in favour of broader, more generalised political messaging that fails to address the specific needs of the working-class and poor communities. Attitudes towards political parties were similarly shaped by local experience. The Conservative Party was frequently associated with wealthier, more affluent areas and with policies perceived as benefiting places and people unlike those in the study. Labour, by contrast, was sometimes viewed as more sympathetic in principle, but distant in practice. This ambivalence reflects how class-based political identities

are mediated by place, with participants struggling to see how national parties meaningfully engage with the realities of life in economically marginal coastal towns.

Despite this disillusionment, some participants expressed tentative hope for change. When discussing the Labour Party under Keir Starmer, participants in one focus group suggested they were somewhat hopeful that Labour might represent them more effectively, especially in contrast to the Conservative Party, which they viewed as out of touch. However, the study reveals a clear disconnect between the lived experiences of participants and the political system. The rise of neoliberalism and the shift towards individualism in British politics have marginalised working-class voices, leading to widespread political disengagement. However, despite their disillusionment, participants expressed a faint hope that Labour, in its new incarnation, might offer a better representation of their needs.

When asked what class they belong to, not a single participant said the ‘precariat’. This was despite the terms popularity and use in sociology and despite the participants all having read an information sheet which discussed the precariat theory before the research. Instead, the most common answer was, “what do you mean?” Participants’ confusion did not stem from an absence of class consciousness, but from the dissonance between their lived, nationally rooted understandings of class and abstract sociological classifications. This suggests that while material conditions may have become more precarious under neoliberalism, the underlying class structure – and individuals’ sense of where they belong within it – remains comparatively stable.

This leads this thesis to argue that academic discourses of class, like theories of a precariat, could actually be causing more harm for the communities and individuals they are assigned to. Rather than creating a collective identity, such theories fail to engage with how class is already understood and understood relationally, instead misrecognising lived class positions and potentially intensifying feelings of dislocation.

Therefore, it is argued here that sociologists should refrain from the constant renaming of classes and work within the parameters of colloquial understandings. For example, instead of arguing that there is now a precariat class, one could argue that there is a precarious fraction of the working-class. There are numerous competing theories of class, each attempting to describe the social stratification of society. These theories are problematic not only for scholars

but also for the people they aim to describe. Class-consciousness, a potential catalyst for political change, is hindered by the multiplicity of class theories, making it harder for individuals to identify with a specific class or understand the broader social forces at play in their lives.

Overall, responses to the question “what class are you?” may not point to the erosion or fluidity of class, but to the limits of academic attempts to rename and reclassify it. Participants’ difficulty lay not in locating themselves socially, but in translating their lived experiences into unfamiliar theoretical categories. This highlights a disjuncture between sociological classification and everyday class consciousness, rather than an absence of class identity itself.

The struggle to define class, then, is not primarily a problem of empirical uncertainty, but of conceptual overproduction. When class is repeatedly redefined, subdivided, and relabelled, it risks becoming analytically opaque and politically inert. This thesis therefore argues that class should be understood as a durable structural position, shaped by national histories and institutions, and articulated through vernacular and experiential forms of identification. Attending to how class is already lived and named is essential if class analysis is to retain both sociological clarity and political relevance.

While this thesis focuses primarily on classed experiences of precarity, the findings suggest that future research could further explore how place mediates political identity, engagement and disillusionment, particularly in coastal and peripheral towns that occupy an ambiguous position within national political imaginaries.

7.2 Conclusion

7.2.1 Future research

Further research could take from the data of this extended case method and create a better-informed quantitative project.

The findings of this thesis have identified a critical opportunity for future work exploring the intersection of class, mental health, and political disengagement using a mixed-methods approach, particularly through Bourdieu's theoretical framework. Bourdieu's concepts of capital (economic, cultural, social) and habitus could offer valuable insights into how individuals in precarious situations navigate their social world and how these dynamics influence their mental health and political behaviour. In particular, future studies could employ both qualitative and quantitative methods to examine how different forms of capital influence people's ability to access resources like mental health care and political participation.

A mixed-methods approach would allow for a comprehensive exploration of how individuals experience and navigate precarity in their daily lives. Qualitative interviews could continue to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of those in precarious situations, as this thesis has done. Quantitative data, such as surveys, could offer a broader view of the prevalence of mental health issues and political disengagement among people in positions of poverty and precarity, while also enabling the identification of statistical patterns in relation to different forms of capital. This combination of data would facilitate a more robust understanding of the role of habitus in both the personal struggles of those in precarity and their political attitudes.

Moreover, future research could investigate how Bourdieu's theory of fields could be applied to the political and health fields. Specifically, how do people in precarious situations perceive the political field, and how do they engage with or withdraw from it based on their access to cultural, social, or economic capital? Likewise, in the health field. How do inequalities in capital shape the quality of mental health care individuals receive and their ability to navigate health services effectively? This approach could reveal how structural inequalities not only affect material conditions but also shape individuals' mental health and political outlooks.

Moreover, future research could expand on the study's critique of neoliberal, individualistic approaches to mental health care by investigating how community-based support systems – framed by Bourdieu's theory of social capital – can act as a buffer against the effects of precarity. By focusing on community networks and their role in mitigating mental health challenges, future studies could explore how social solidarity and collective action could offer alternatives to the current medicalised approaches to mental health in neoliberal societies.

Finally, the data on class in this research is very interesting but also very limited. There was no explicit mention of class in any interviews apart from at the end of the interviews when each participant was asked, outright, what class they belong to. I would like to re-enter the field and delve more into the answers that are provided.

7.2.2 Summary of contribution

Taken together, these findings offer a novel understanding of class in contemporary Britain. Most prominently, the main contribution of this research is using first-hand experiences of an under-researched group to propose a reframing of the 'precariat' as a segment of the working-class, rather than a class in- or of- itself. This position is a radical departure from some of the existing and most prominent sociological literature on the precariat (*e.g.*, Standing 2011; Savage 2015; Foti 2017) which, firstly, position the 'precariat' as a discrete social category and, therefore inherently distance members of this group from collective working-class struggle, and, secondly, rely solely on secondary data and sociological imaginings rather than first-hand experiences of the people the theory is used to describe. Moreover, even earlier critics of the theorised-class, have mostly avoided centring their understandings in first-hand data collection (*e.g.*, Wright 2015; Wacquant 2022; di Bernardo 2021)

In making this primary contribution, particularly through hearing the stories of people in the precariat group, my work also makes a number of other contributions to sociology of class.

A comprehensive literature review of the 'precariat'

The 'precariat' has so many different meanings. Foti's (2017) precariat is a middle-class well-educated younger generation of revolutionary "pink" leftists, exiting above an underclass. Savage's (2015) precariat is 'dangerous' and made up of people who lack in all levels of capital. Standing's (2011) precariat is just confused. In some of his chapters they appear as much-like

Foti's and in others they share more similarities with Savage's. On top of this, there is a lot of literature debating whether the precariat even is a class. Now, over a decade-on since Standing's first book on the subject, the term is in a sort-of sociological purgatory, completely accepted by some and completely rejected by others.

This thesis offers the fullest overview of the theory and its various theorists so far. It is a tool that can help sociologists understand why utilising the term is problematic, due to the disparities in how it is used. Moreover, the literature review provides theoretical context for the precariat, displaying that it does not exist in isolation.

Ultimately, the literature review provided an in-depth overview of the precariat, which highlighted the lack of utility of the concept when it is employed to refer to a class. Furthermore, the wide-range of meanings and disparities in how it is used contribute to the weakness of the concept as a class-framing.

Illuminating the mental health crisis

This thesis also makes a significant contribution to understanding the intersection of mental health and precarity, especially within the context of austerity and welfare cuts. While not initially focused on mental illness, this thesis reveals the pervasive nature of mental health challenges among individuals in positions of poverty and precarity.

The research critiques existing models of understanding mental health, particularly Guy Standing's (2020) use of "stress", arguing that this simplification overlooks the complex psychological struggles experienced by those in poverty. It expands on the arguments presented by the World Health Organization (2024) and Mind (2024; 2025) regarding the detrimental effects of chronic stress and health inequalities, particularly for those lower on the social ladder (*see also* Marmot 2015). The study also examines how economic hardship, particularly the introduction of UC and austerity measures, has exacerbated mental health problems, highlighting how poverty reduces autonomy and access to proper care.

A key contribution of the research is its critique of individualistic mental health approaches in neoliberal societies. By focusing on personal responsibility, these frameworks often ignore the structural factors contributing to mental health issues. Through participants' experiences, the research sheds light on the inadequacies of current mental health services and advocates for community-based support systems that address both personal and structural causes of mental distress. These findings challenge the dominant, medicalised view of mental health care, suggesting that emotional support, community ties, and holistic approaches are vital for addressing the complex needs of individuals in precarity.

Furthermore, the study highlights the intersections of childhood trauma – such as domestic abuse, addiction, and bereavement – with the ongoing struggles of adulthood. These factors compound the mental health challenges faced by participants, making it clear that precarity cannot be understood solely as a product of unstable employment but must also consider personal histories of trauma and the social determinants of mental health. The research advocates for a more nuanced understanding of precarity, one that considers both structural conditions and individual experiences of trauma.

Ultimately, the research underscores the necessity for reform in both mental health care and social policy, advocating for better resourcing for community-centred approaches that provide accessible, empathetic, and holistic support for those navigating the intersection of poverty, trauma, and mental health challenges.

An argument for real and authentic representation

Another academic contribution of this research lies in its exploration of political disengagement among marginalised communities, particularly those living in poverty and precarious situations. Through semi-structured interviews and focus groups, the study identifies a pervasive sense of disillusionment, distrust, and detachment from the political system. Participants expressed a lack of faith in politicians, largely due to perceived self-interest and a failure to represent the interests of the working-class. This disengagement was compounded by low levels of political knowledge and education, reflecting broader socio-economic disparities.

The study also links participants' disengagement to neoliberal policies, which have promoted individualism and minimised the role of the state in providing welfare. Many participants internalised these neoliberal values, leading to a sense of political alienation. The research further reveals that individuals' social and educational backgrounds shaped their perceptions of politics, with many feeling powerless and excluded from political discourse.

Importantly, the research identifies the need for more authentic political representation. Participants expressed a desire for political leaders who are relatable and share their experiences of poverty and hardship. This calls for a shift towards more inclusive political representation, where the voices of marginalised groups are not only heard but authentically represented. The study contributes to the literature on political disillusionment and disengagement by emphasising the need for genuine, grounded political leadership to address the concerns of working-class communities and rebuild trust in the political system.

Challenging class theories

Another contribution of this research lies in its critique of contemporary class theory and its implications for the understanding of social stratification. The research challenges the way sociological classifications – such as the precariat, *lumpenproletariat*, and 'underclass'—fail to resonate with individuals in precarious economic conditions. Through interviews with participants, the study finds that many individuals, despite being part of marginalised groups, do not identify with these academic terms, often rejecting them or showing confusion. This disconnection underscores a key issue: academic discourses of class may not only be irrelevant to those they aim to describe but could also undermine the potential for collective class-based identities.

The study critiques the tendency within sociology to constantly redefine classes, proposing that such renaming does not foster a sense of solidarity or political consciousness. Instead, it destabilises identities and alienates individuals from the discourse. It suggests that sociologists should work within the boundaries of colloquial understandings of class, like

referring to a ‘precarious fraction of the working class’, rather than labelling it as a distinct class. This approach would align more closely with people's lived experiences and identities.

Furthermore, the study challenges established research on class identification, specifically critiquing the work of Evans and Tilley (2017), who argue that 60% of Britons identify as working-class. The research in this thesis reveals that, when left to answer freely, participants in precarious situations often did not align with traditional class categories or felt disempowered by the concept of class itself. This highlights the complexity of class identity and the limitations of existing frameworks, especially when considering individuals in precarious living conditions, such as the homeless.

In conclusion, the thesis contributes to the ongoing debate in class theory by arguing that class definitions imposed by sociologists often fail to capture the lived realities of individuals. It emphasises the importance of understanding class in ways that resonate with people's own perceptions and experiences, rather than imposing academic categories that may hinder both sociological analysis and the potential for meaningful political action. The research calls for a more grounded and context-sensitive approach to class theory, one that acknowledges the fluid and contested nature of class in contemporary society.

7.2.3 Reflections

Imposter syndrome and the value of sociological research

The past near-four year of reading for, researching for, and writing this thesis have been fraught with challenges. I think it's important, as I discussed in the methodology chapter that I recognise myself and my role in this research.

I have suffered with imposter syndrome throughout the entirety of the process. Even as I write this sentence, so close to completing my thesis, I can't help but question myself – *should I be doing this? Why did I start a PhD in the first place? Could my time be better-spent helping my community in other ways?* The journey has been such a rollercoaster that some days I will

be filled with pride to be on the path to this achievement but on others I question the value of my work (I hope, for my sake and for the sake of the participants in my research, the reader sees the value). Such admissions of questioning one's own research may seem foolish to some, but I am taking a complex realist stance, recognising that my own imposter syndrome forms part of the complexity of the research whilst staying as true to the realism of the participants' lives and experiences as possible. This is not me saying that my research has no value, but that my imposter syndrome often leads me to question it. Another reason for this is my work life during the past four years. I have mostly made my income from lecturing, surviving thanks to precarious short-term teaching contracts. In the periods where I have not had teaching opportunities (18 months total) I have worked as a Support Worker, looking after young men with learning disabilities. The role, as a Support Worker, provided a sharp contrast with my studying for a PhD. As a Support Worker, I was able to see the value I added to my community, and to the young men I supported, on a daily basis. The smiles, the laughter, and the slow but constant growth of independence I was helping the young men achieve – the value I was adding to my community was visible. In academic work, as I have found, the visible achievements of helping to improve one's community is less easy to see.

My own research value was not always helped at times by gatekeepers. While most were excited and pleased to have me come and interview people, there were a few that had reservations. This extract from my research diary displays such an encounter:

Research Diary (18/04/2023): “Emma [one of two women who run a community centre], unfortunately, was very off with me from the start. She was quite demanding to know why the residents should speak to me, what I could offer them and what the end goal would be. I explained how the research would give voice to the people and would end up as published academics works. But she was quite dismissive. She even said, “If I let every student in here to do research it would be non stop.” This was quite demoralising to hear. I explained that I'm not an undergraduate student, I'm doing a big PhD research project but she didn't seem that interested. I explained my background but she was very defensive.”

It was very frustrating at the time, as I knew I had good intentions and do have hopes that my research will be helpful. However, I also recognised Emma's reservations as legitimate. If I was her, I would feel the same way. The reason I would feel such a way, is because of the detachment between academic discourses and understandings of class and real-world lived-experiences of class. In a way not-too-dissimilar from political representation, academia is a predominantly and disproportionately middle-class field and universities are middle-class spaces. So, despite my frustrations, I recognise that Emma was right to have her reservations. However, through this study, its findings and contribution to knowledge I hope to have bridged at least some of the gap between lived-experiences of class and academia.

Some final thoughts on the precariat

I have made it clear from my introduction and throughout that I do not believe that the precariat is a class. I recognise it as a relevant sociological grouping but believe that using the term 'class' to describe it goes too far. If Standing's (2011) book was called 'The Precariat: the new dangerous sociological grouping', it may have attracted less attention, but it would have been a truer reflection in my opinion. This opinion, in part, motivated the reason for this study, ever since I first started reading about the so-called 'class'. As discussed in chapter 2, it even appears that Standing (2011) has reservations about whether the precariat is a class (despite using the term in the title of his book).

Precarity, in the sense that Standing conceives of it, is a force that has formed an economic class, within the context of neoliberalism and globalisation. However, from my standpoint, his understanding of precarity is one created through the lens of middle-class academia. As I'm currently experiencing, the life on an academic is precarious. Since starting my PhD, I've had six different short-term/temporary contracts to lead seminars, teach lectures and assist in research across both Durham University and Bournemouth University. These types of precarious contracts are normal for early-career researchers and lecturers. However, Standing (2011) failed to recognise, as did Savage (2015), that precarity is not a new phenomenon for working-class people. While it may be new for middle class academics

(people *like him* and, now, *like me*), precarity has been a stable feature of working-class life since the working-class came into existence.

Foti's (2017) conceptualisation of the precariat is best understood as a predominantly middle-class formation, made up of middle-class graduates disappointed that their qualifications no longer guarantee stable employment. This framing challenges the idea of the precariat as a universal new class by situating it within a *crisis* of the middle-class, rather than as a historical experience of the working-class. Standing's (2011) own typology of the precariat, into atavists, nostalgics, and progressives, further reflects this tension. His analysis relies most heavily on the so-called 'progressives' (the educated and often middle-class fraction of the precariat) to be agents of political change. In doing so, he marginalises the atavists and nostalgics, whose precariousness is rooted more firmly in long-term working-class experiences of insecurity. This imbalance underscores the problem with treating the precariat as a new class: it elevates the novelty of middle-class precarity at the expense of long-term issues of precarity spanning generations of the working-class.

Theorists like Standing compare the modern day to the heralded post-war period, a relatively short amount of time where the working-classes were guaranteed work, social housing was being built, and where unions held immense power. But, when taking a broader historical lens this was not the norm but, rather, the exception. So, precarity might be a relatively new phenomenon for the middle-class but for the working-class and a working-class history of class it is not significant enough to represent a new class being created.

Reflecting on politics

Through my research, participants displayed a small amount of optimism for Keir Starmer and the Labour Party. However, as I write this final section of my thesis, two years after leaving the field and just over a year into Starmer's term as PM, I am (like many others) bitterly disappointed and frustrated with the Labour government.

After over a decade of Conservative-led austerity, the people were hoping for change. And, after I left the field, the feelings of my participants were seen to hold some credence, with

the Labour Party winning all three parliamentary seats in Bournemouth and Poole for the first time ever, and the Labour Party winning a landslide election. However, while I identified some optimism for Keir Starmer's Labour leadership, it was not overwhelming amongst the participants, and it was more out of desperate hope and a feeling that he couldn't be any worse than what had come before. In other words, Starmer was not elected on the back of charisma and a tidal wave of support, as Blair had been in 1997. Starmer was elected because first-past-the-post has created a two-party system where Labour was considered to be the only real alternative. After 14 years of things getting worse under five Conservative PMs, the Conservative's position became untenable, and it was Labour's *go*.

In the year since Keir Starmer has come into power, it is my opinion that it only proves Crouch's (2020) theory of post-democracy remains as valid as ever. The Labour Party are just another neoliberal party. The sense of a crisis of representation runs throughout both my research and wider political content: participants did not feel represented by those in power, and the evidence since the election reinforces this view, with the latest opinion polls showing that just 23% of Brits have a favourable opinion of the PM (YouGov 2025). There is a growing distrust of the political class, who are seen to game the system for their own benefit while failing to represent those in precarious financial positions.

There is currently a narrative that exists at the moment that working-class people carry with them racism. They are 'dangerous', in the language of Standing (2011) and Savage (2015), due to the apparent ease in which far-right fascists could gain their support. From my work in the field, nothing could be farther from the truth. The spaces where I met with participants, despite the majority of the people being white British, were all occupied by people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, when interviewing participants there were no racist sentiments expressed. The main findings were based around people's desperation for *authentic* political representation that offers something *different*. Something that the Labour Party is not offering.

The vacuum seems to be being filled by Nigel Farage and his Reform UK Party. If there were to be an election tomorrow, it seems likely they would win. Many middle-class commentators and academics, detached from working-class communities, will tell you that Reform's popularity is due to the inherent racism of the working-class, or that the working-

class are ill-educated therefore they ‘fall’ for the dog whistles of the far-right. I think this is nonsense. The participants in my research were not stupid, nor were they racist. But they see Labour and Conservative as the same thing. Politicians are just politicians. The distinction between Labour politician and Conservative politician is not just blurred, its practically non-existent. While there are, of course, some racist people in the UK, the vast majority of people are not turning to the far-right for that reason. It is because the left is not offering an alternative.

A couple of weeks before writing this current section, a Labour MP, Rushanara Ali, resigned from her position as minister for homelessness. Her resignation came after a scandal that found that in her position as a landlord, she had evicted tenants and then upped the rent by £700 per month. This is not an isolated case – many MPs are landlords, and the system allows this. Because of first-past-the-post, people often vote not out of genuine support but because there is no other viable option, or they do not vote at all, as evidenced by the fact only 59.7% of the electorate turned out at the last General Election, 7.6% lower than the 2019 General Election (House of Commons Library 2024). Ali’s case is symptomatic of a wider political system that fails to represent the interests of the precarious and instead reproduces the power of those already benefitting from the system. It illustrates the hypocrisy of a political class that claims to speak for the vulnerable while actively profiting from their exploitation.

The people are fed up with this sort of nonsense. The Labour Party, if it has any hope of winning the support of the masses of working-class people at the next election, must purge the party of the middle-class, the privately educated, and the landlords. It must break from neoliberalism and embrace radical ideas new and old, such as full employment and national house-building programmes. Without such a break, and without genuine attempts by the middle-class left to make way for the working-class, the crisis of representation will only deepen, leaving space for the far-right to present themselves as the only political alternative.

I went into this PhD an optimist, genuinely believing that the Labour Party was the greatest vehicle for political change and the advancement of working-class interests in Britain. Now, at the time of writing this final section of my thesis, I am as disillusioned as my participants. As things stand, I will not be voting at all in the next general election. I have taken great comfort from the powerful support offered by community organisations and individuals I’ve met along this journey. I am now of the belief that the greatest political actions, and the

ones that offer most hope, are community-based initiatives. Unfortunately, the political left, dominated by middle-class interests, have left me, as they have many with many other working-class people, with no other choice but to abandon the Labour Party.

I finish on this sombre note because it is symbolic of my frustrations and reasoning for pursuing this thesis. I am frustrated that the middle-class left do not recognise the usefulness and power of working-class understandings. Arguments that the Labour Party and the Conservative Party are both, now, essentially the *same* (i.e., neoliberal in ideology) are commonplace in lecture theatres, the source of discussion in seminar rooms, and the focus of essays in university campuses, all over Britain. However, while the vast majority of my participants were not as fortunate as others to gain an education and do not hold the same political vocabulary, their understandings of this issue of policy convergence and neoliberal hegemony is inherently understood and recognised all-the-same. They recognise it through their lived experiences, not through books and lectures. Therefore, the middle-class left (in academia, politics, and the media) should do all they can to resolve the issues of detachment between themselves and the working-class, celebrate the political power of working-class lived experiences, and put working-class people back into the core of left-wing politics. Ultimately, I hope that this thesis has displayed a good reasoning for listening to the lived experiences of people in positions of poverty and precarity, so that we in academia can illuminate the issues in our society.

The precariat is a middle-class and modern creation. Through this research I hope to have demonstrated the need for the political, ideological and academic left to make room for authentic representation and (most importantly) representatives of the working-class. In so doing, we as a society need to develop stronger and better resourced community spaces to address negative lived experiences associated with precarity, including helping to lift people out of mental health crises and challenge individualised understandings of mental health issues.

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Appendix A: Information sheet

Information Sheet

The Precariat: A new class-in itself?

A case study set in Bournemouth, investigating the culture, politics, history and class-credentials of the precariat.

The project aims to explore the class structure of modern Britain, and question a new theory that argues there is a new class called the 'precariat'. I would like to gather data by talking to people in precarious financial positions – such as claiming Universal Credit and/or working on a zero-hours contract.

I have chosen Bournemouth because I have experienced being unemployed in Bournemouth myself, and feel that people here are often marginalised in discussions about social class. I believe that you will be able to give me and the academic community greater insight into life in modern Britain for those who are without stable employment.

I am interested in everything, from your day-to-day lives to your political views.

Interviews should last approximately an hour, but can go on for longer if you are happy for them to, or be shorter if you so wish. Interviews will take place wherever is convenient for you and at a time that is convenient for you.

This is a research project for a PhD Dissertation at Durham University.

You may withdraw from the study at any time and all data collected will be destroyed should you request it.

Contact Details

Researcher: David Hicks – david.hicks@durham.ac.uk

If you have any issues regarding the research that you feel uncomfortable discussing with myself, please contact:

Supervisor: Dr. Jonathan Wistow: jonathan.wistow@durham.ac.uk

Appendix B: Consent form



Consent Form

The Precariat: A dangerous new class-in-itself?

Please tick boxes below to indicate you are happy to participate in this study:

I have read the information sheet and been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research project, with satisfactory responses.	
I understand that I have the right not to participate in any of the activities if I don't want to, and that I can stop or take a break at any time.	
I give my permission for the interview/focus group to be audio recorded and then transcribed into a written document.	
I understand that all data from the interview/focus group will be stored securely, and that any identifiable information about myself in the transcript, research documents and publications will be anonymised.	
I am aware that my personal details will be kept confidential.	
I understand that whilst my identity will be anonymised, it cannot be guaranteed that my comments in the interview will not be identifiable to others who know me.	
I understand that my participation in the interview may be used in publications and presentations arising from this research (e.g. anonymised quotations in PhD dissertation, books, articles and presentations).	
I understand that I am free to choose whether to take part in this research, and can withdraw my data from it at any time within 6 months after taking part.	
I understand that I can keep a copy of this consent form for my records.	
I confirm that I understand what is required of me for this research project, and that I consent to taking part.	

Finally, please sign below to consent to take part in this study:

Signature: _____

Print Name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Privacy notice

Privacy Notice

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed before analysis.

If you would like to withdraw from the study then you are free to do so at any time. Simply contact me and I will destroy all data collected from you, at your request.

For the purpose of this project, all participants will be anonymised. No personal details about you that could make you identifiable will be used. For example, your name, address and place of work will not be published. The name of the town and local areas/districts will be used.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your privacy or would like to withdraw from the study, please contact me.

Contact Details

Researcher: David Hicks – david.hicks@durham.ac.uk

If you have any issues regarding the research that you feel uncomfortable discussing with myself, please contact:

Supervisor: Dr. Jonathan Wistow: jonathan.wistow@durham.ac.uk

Appendix D: Semi-structured interview guide (developed questions and prompts in red)

1. What is your life story?

- Steer conversation to their family – History (what jobs did your parents do?; Tell me more about your experience of work: What jobs have you had? What job do you do now? What job would you like in the future?
- **Have you ever suffered any mental health issues? What caused your mental health issues? What support do you receive for your mental health issues?**

2. Tell me about your local community: What would you change about your local area/town?

- How has it changed?

3. I'd like to know about your political beliefs

- **Do you vote in elections? Who do you vote for? Why do you vote for them? What do you think of politicians? How could things be improved in this country?**

4. What class are you?

- **As in social class; the most common answers are 'working' and 'middle'**

Appendix E: Visual cue of prominent politicians



Appendix F: Table of field work

<u>Place visited (names anonymised)</u>	<u>Approximate hours spent there</u>	<u>Ethnographic activities</u>
Westfield Community Hub	44	Participant recruitment; informal conversations; semi-structured interviews; observations of community fridge; observation of bingo; observation of volunteer labour; active participation in Men's Shed; reflexive observation of classed interactions and researcher positionality; one focus group; organisation of walking interviews.
Riverside Community Centre	16	Gatekeeper meetings to negotiate access; multiple semi-structured interviews; observation of community fridge.
Pathways Support Service	8	Observation of support service; recruitment of participants; multiple semi-structured interviews; organisation of walking interviews.

Regional Social Enterprise Office	8	Semi-structured interviews; observation of street homelessness.
Central Outreach Centre	8	Observation of food provision service; recruitment of participants; multiple semi-structured interviews; one focus group; organisation of walking interviews.

Appendix G: Table of participant demographics

Name (anonymised)	Employment status	Gender	Ethnicity
Becky	Precarious employment	Female	White British
Tanya	Unemployed	Female	White British
Maria	Unemployed	Female	White British
Caroline	Unemployed	Female	White British
Hayley	Retired	Female	White British
Corinne	Unemployed	Female	Black British
Frankie	Unemployed	Female	Asian non-British
Barbara	Unemployed	Female	White British
Simon	Precarious employment	Male	White British
Clare	Unemployed	Female	White British
Emily	Unemployed	Female	White British
Ben	Unemployed	Male	White British
Carla	Precariously employed	Female	White British
Mark	Unemployed	Male	White British
Andy	Precarious employment	Male	White non-British
Annette	Precarious employment	Female	White British
Darren	Unemployed	Male	White British
Martha	Unemployed	Female	White British
Liz	Unemployed	Female	White British

Steve	Unemployed	Male	White British
Brendan	Unemployed	Male	White British
Jake	Unemployed	Male	White British
Chris	Unemployed	Male	White British
Ernie	Unemployed	Male	Black British
Aaron	Unemployed	Male	White British
Jay	Unemployed	Male	White British
Colin	Unemployed	Male	White British
Jack	Unemployed	Male	White British
James	Unemployed	Male	White British
Harry	Unemployed	Male	White British
Sam	Unemployed	Male	White British
George	Unemployed	Male	White British
Kelly	Unemployed	Female	White British
Terry	Unemployed	Male	White British
Brad	Unemployed	Male	White British
John	Unemployed	Male	White British
John	Unemployed	Male	White British
Thomas	Unemployed	Male	White non-British
Malik	Unemployed	Male	Asian non-British
Shaun	Unemployed	Male	White British
Matthew	Unemployed	Male	White British

Charlie	Retired	Male	White British
Kevin	Precarious employment	Male	White British
Liam	Precarious employment	Male	White British
Frank	Unemployed	Male	White British
Tommy	Unemployed	Male	Black British
Kyle	Unemployed	Male	White British
Jakob	Unemployed	Male	White non-British