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The Brazilianisation of Youth Transitions in Australia and the UK?

Prof. Andy Furlong and Peter Kelly (PhD)

Abstract

A central theme of Beck's argument in *The Brave New World of Work* (2000) is that labour markets in the developed world are taking on some of the core characteristics that have been associated with less developed labour markets such as employment insecurity, informality and precarity. A process he refers to as Brazilianisation. In this paper we consider whether Beck's thesis can help us understand changes in youth transitions in Australia and the UK by developing a comparative analysis of processes of casualisation in the youth labour markets of the two countries. We assess the extent to which precarious labour market biographies have become entrenched and represent modern forms of engagement with the labour market. While evidence is presented to suggest that young people's labour market experiences have been affected by a trend towards greater casualisation, we argue that the changes are having the greatest impact on those in the weakest positions: in both countries women are more likely to be affected than men and casualisation is most evident in the lowest skilled occupations.

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Introduction

We know, feel and grasp that we are all potentially unemployed or underemployed, part-time or make shift workers without any real job security. But what each of us knows individually has not yet become an awareness of our own common reality
(Andre Gorz, cited in Beck 2000, p.5).

The title for this paper comes from Ulrich Beck's (2000) *The Brave New World of Work*. A central theme of the book is that contemporary labour markets in the more developed 'first world' are changing in ways that see them taking on some of the central characteristics of labour markets in the less developed 'third world' – what Beck refers to as the Brazilianisation of labour markets in the developed world. Central to these transformations is the 'spread of temporary and insecure employment, discontinuity and loose informality' into 'first world' labour markets – which for the period of three decades or so after the Second World War had been the 'bastions of full employment' (p.1). Beck's (2000) argument is that in a 'semi-industrialized' economy such as Brazil, full time waged or salaried employment is a secure form of existence for 'only a minority of the economically active population; the majority earn their living in more precarious conditions' (p.1). For Beck a life world characterised by 'nomadic "multi-activity"' is not a 'pre modern relic', nor is it any longer *just* a feature of the female labour market. Rather, this precariousness and insecurity emerges in the more developed world as a fundamental characteristic of the movement from a *work society* to a *risk society* (pp2-3).

In this paper we discuss how youth transitions in Australia and the UK can be understood under these circumstances. Youth, as a population, as a time in the lifecourse, as a concept in many policy and academic discussions, is most often imagined in terms of transition. In turn, transition is imagined as signifying movement from *somewhere*, to *somewhere else*: from, in this case, a more or less stable stage of life called childhood, to another more or less stable stage called adulthood. Youth, historically, has been imagined as a time of *storm and stress*, of *identity crises*, and of *conflicts* to be resolved before the arrival at/of adulthood (e.g. Hall, 1904; Coleman, 1961; Erikson, 1968). Throughout the last half of the 20th century this stage in the lifecourse has become more extended, and, it is argued, more risky for larger numbers of successive generations of young people (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Wyn and White, 1997). This prolonged process of transition and the mapping of the risks associated with it is shaped, and mirrored, by a variety of education, training, and employment policies (Hood *et al.*, 2001; Kemshall, 2002). In this sense Youth – at least in the advanced Liberal democracies – is a period in the lifecourse whose shape, boundaries and nature are subject to the shifting priorities of different institutions and political, economic and cultural processes.

During the last 30 years or so processes of globalisation – characterised by increased competition, rapid technological change and economic uncertainty – have profoundly changed the world of work, and the ways employers, trade unions and governments think about labour markets and workers. 'Flexibility',

‘casualisation’, ‘upskilling’, ‘multi-skilling’, ‘life long learning’ ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ workforces are the new realities and buzzwords in the global markets of ‘fast capitalism’. These developments have a particular and significant impact on young workers who face the risks of a declining and uncertain youth labour market and changed expectations in the transitions from youthful dependence to adult independence. Many commentators have argued that these risks make the very idea of stable, linear transitions intensely problematic for large sections of the youth population – with a range of profound consequences for young people, families, communities and the nation.

In this paper we will develop a comparative analysis of casualisation in youth labour markets in Australia and the UK. We will sketch the main elements of Beck’s (2000) Brazilianisation thesis to orient this analysis. We do not set out to prove or disprove the thesis. Rather we make reference to Beck’s work at a metaphorical level to provoke discussion about trends, processes and policies in ways that open up new lines of thinking. Moreover, the comparative element of this analysis can, as Campbell (2004) argues, provoke clarification of particularities in different contexts, explore certain generalisations and illuminate policy, institutional and cultural differences and similarities – all with the purpose of provoking new ways of thinking about the nature of youth transitions, and how these might be understood in various policy contexts.

We draw on the Australian and UK Labour Force Surveys as well as the Australian Forms of Employment Survey (1998) to provide a statistical picture of the nature and experience of youth labour markets in Australia and the UK. This analysis examines an emergent, and important, element of youth transitions – the increasingly casualised early labour market opportunities and experiences of young people that give rise to new ways of describing youth transitions in terms of *linearity*, *non-linearity*, or *churn*. A key issue for this paper, and for future research, is to explore the distinction between *flexibility* and *precarity*. The two processes can look the same in terms of patterns of labour market movement and therefore can lead us to assume a non-existent commonality of experience. In fact what we have is a classic social division, in which the nature and character of *choice* is intensely problematic, and is structured by patterns of social disadvantage. So that for many young people their choices, in terms of economic activity and labour market participation, are profoundly influenced by the complex relationships between social class, gender, ethnicity, and geography.

The Brazilianisation thesis

Beck’s (2000) thesis addresses concerns that are also covered in a number of other texts including Sennett’s (1998) *The Corrosion of Character*, Bauman’s (2001) *The Individualized Society* and Rifkin’s *The End of Work* (1995). At issue here is a sense that processes of globalisation, facilitated by electronically enabled, micro-processor based technologies, have transformed the physical reality of paid work in many of the industrialised nations. In addition, these processes have transformed the spaces in which work is imagined. So that new narratives of work, of its value, of who participates in it, and how this

participation is structured, have emerged and been articulated by employers, unions and governments.

Beck (2000) illustrates his argument by quoting labour market figures for Germany which indicate a rise in the number of employees in the *precarious group* from 10 per cent in the 1960s, to 25 per cent in the 1970s, to nearly 33 per cent in the late 1990s. These figures are, however, referenced to a data set that is not directly replicable in other contexts – a situation which raises issues about the generalisable applicability of his argument. However, Beck is right to suggest that there is work to do in thinking about the characteristics of a ‘political economy of insecurity’ (2000, pp.2-3). He argues that there is a need to examine the rules and consequences of a new power game played between ‘territorially fixed’ participants, such as governments and trade unions, and ‘non-territorially fixed’ participants, such as capital, commerce and finance. A connected concern is the apparent need by the territorially fixed players to choose between higher unemployment accompanied by relatively low levels of poverty; or lower levels of unemployment existing alongside ‘spectacular poverty’. Another focus, suggests Beck, should be on the ways in which ‘technologically advanced capitalism’, and its displacement of labour, means that ‘all paid work is subject to the threat of displacement’ – a situation Gorz highlights and which others, such as Giddens (1990, 1991), have addressed through discussions about the anxieties and uncertainties that are said to characterise these times. Further, Beck argues that there is a need to explore the ways in which the emergence of large measures of precarious employment spill, domino like, into other aspects of the institutional fabric of the work society: ‘the foundations of the social-welfare state are collapsing; normal life stories are breaking up into fragments; old age poverty is programmed in advance’ (p.3). Finally, Beck suggests that there is a need to investigate and analyse the ways in which the economic and political gospel of ‘labour market flexibility’ in First World economies results in a redistribution of risk away from the social insurance technologies of the welfare state, to the capacities, behaviours, dispositions and choices of individuals – a so-called *individualisation of risk management* (Kelly 2001 a&b).

In a discussion over two chapters of *The Rise and Fall of Labour, and Local Orders, Global Chaos*, Bauman (2001) makes a number of observations that are particularly relevant to the argument we are developing here. Pointing to novel processes of individualisation in the world of work, he argues that working lives have become ‘saturated with uncertainty’ (p.24). In some respects, as he concedes, there is little that is ‘particularly new’ about this situation – ‘working life has been full of uncertainty since time immemorial’. Bauman’s argument, however, is that contemporary workplace uncertainties are of a ‘strikingly novel kind’ – these uncertainties are a ‘powerful *individualizing* force’. For Bauman, such uncertainty ‘divides instead of uniting, and since there is no telling who might wake up in what division, the idea of “common interests” grows ever more nebulous and in the end becomes incomprehensible. Fears, anxieties and grievances are made in such a way as to be suffered alone’ (p.24). For Bauman (2001) the uncertainty and precarity characteristic of ‘flexible capitalism’

(Sennett 1998) also have a structural element to them. That is, flexibility looks different, feels different, and has different consequences depending on the element of choice that shapes this flexibility. Little choice in the matter – because of circumstances that are influenced by social class, gender, ethnicity and geography – is different to a wealth of choice and opportunity that is delivered by comparative social, economic and cultural advantage.

These very generalised arguments raise a number of important questions about the ways in which changed labour market structures, opportunities, and forms of regulation impact on, and shape, youth transitions in different contexts. We will explore a number of these questions in the following sections.

Youth transitions – linear, non-linear, churned?

Most sociological interpretations of youth, education and work imagine youth as being a key staging point facilitating the more or less successful entry into the adult world of autonomy, responsibility and work (Kelly 2000, a,b&c). A report prepared for the OECD, for example, identifies youth as a ‘stage of life between childhood and adulthood’. Childhood is identified with ‘physiological immaturity, emotional and economic dependence and primary ties with parents and siblings’. Adulthood, in this view, is framed in terms of ‘physiological maturity, emotional and economic autonomy, and by primary ties with the adult partner and children’ (cited in Freeland 1996, p.7). In this sense youth should be a transition from *normal* childhood to *normal* adulthood. These normative portrayals of childhood, youth and adulthood frame much of the pervasive policy and academic discussion of youth at-risk – where risk is associated with the differing, largely individualised, capacities of young people to effect a secure transition into the labour market.

Beck’s (2000) suggestion that increased insecurity and precarity in the labour markets of the more advanced economies has spilt, domino like, into other key areas of the *work society* resonates strongly in these discussions about youth transitions. In Australia the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 1998 a&b) argues that the youth labour market is characterised by ‘higher levels of job mobility, lower average incomes and a different occupational profile to the rest of the working population’ (1998a, p.1). Casual and part-time work, periodic unemployment, complex education and employment pathways, and a concentration of young workers in the retail and food service industries are other key characteristics of the youth labour market (Lewis and Mclean 1999). Similar observations have been made in the UK (and across Europe) but commentators are divided in their views about the extent to which these are features of a segmented labour market in which the work experiences of young and older workers display significant differences (in which case work-based disadvantages are temporary as they are specific to a life stage) or, conversely, whether we are seeing the emergence of new forms of working in the experiences of the young (as implied by Beck).

Concern about the quality of jobs for young people and about the assumed links between a highly skilled and educated labour force and future economic growth has had profound impacts on many other aspects of the work society: education policies in Australia and the UK are geared, increasingly, to encouraging prolonged participation in post compulsory education and training by more and more young people: in Australia and the UK changes in family patterns and relationships are marked by longer periods of, often periodic, dependency for larger numbers of young people (Kiernan 1986, Jones 1995) – the so-called *never-empty-nest syndrome*, which, in Australia sees 40 per cent of 26 year olds continue to live in the family home (Bessant and Watts 2002).

These generalised observations about the changed nature of youth transitions have provoked debate about how youth transitions should be characterised (Wyn and White 1997, Sweet 1995, Bessant & Cook 1998, Furlong et al 2003). These debates are not merely rhetorical. In Australia, for example, they frame policies such as the Common Youth Allowance which takes as a key point of reference levels of parental/guardian income up until the young person is aged 24 – assuming a relationship of dependence until this age. Much of this debate is framed by spatial metaphors. Transitions are linear, or non-linear (Furlong et al., 2003). Transitions are more, or less, fragmented. Historical time enters these discussions when present day transitions are positioned as being less linear, more fragmented, and longer than for previous generations of young people. As Wyn (2004) suggests terms such as ‘post-adolescence’, ‘over-aged young adults’, ‘generation on hold’, ‘extended transitions’ and even ‘parasitic youth’ (Takahashi and Voss, 2000) have entered debates about the nature of the transitions for post-1970s generations (p.17).

In much of this discussion there is a tendency to individualise both the risks associated with these transitions, and the management of these risks. Current policy and academic discussions are strongly flavoured by a voluntarist logic – *life is largely the sum of the choices we make, and risk management is a matter of individuals making better choices*. For instance, Wyn (2004) argues that young people ‘are now navigators of their own biographies and careers’ (p.17); even if they are sailing in uncertain and risky waters, and they have different levels of support, capacity and skill to navigate with. We argue that this sort of logic tends to discount the ways in which age, social class, gender, ethnicity and geography continue to structure life courses, chances and choices – particularly for young people whose life world is determined by relationships of dependence (Kelly 2004). In terms of Beck’s Brazilianisation thesis, the precariousness and uncertainty that accompanies casualisation in contemporary youth labour markets in Australia and the UK, will be shown to impact on different labour market sectors, and on different groups of young people. For these groups choices in relation to participation and activity in these labour markets are not solely the province of the individual – individuals make choices but not under the circumstances of their own choosing.

The Brazilianisation of the Youth labour market in Australia and the UK?

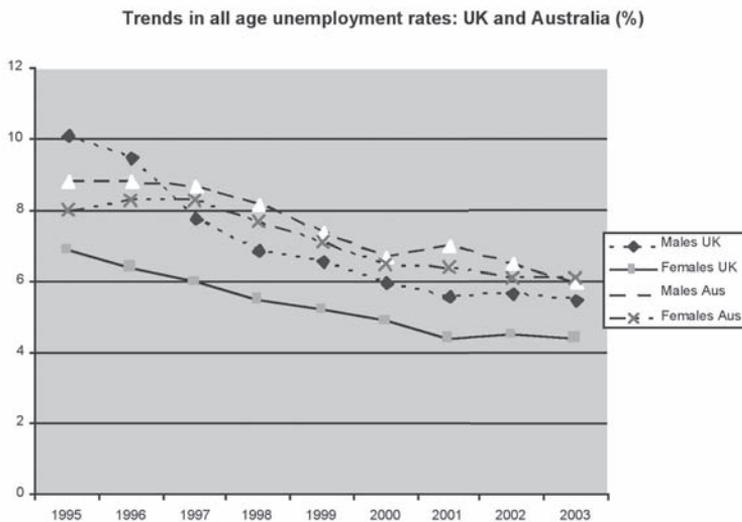
In this section we will examine the labour market experiences of young people in the UK and Australia in order to make an assessment of the extent to which precarious labour biographies have become entrenched and represent modern forms of engagement with the labour market. We argue that there is some evidence to suggest an increase in precarious forms of employment for young people, but suggest that this apparent fluidity masks the survival of deeply entrenched structured inequalities in which less advantaged young people are over-represented in insecure forms of employment.

The Australian and UK Labour Force Surveys are both regular nationally representative surveys that include a range of comparable questions designed to meet OECD data requirements. The UK Labour Force Survey is more comprehensive in scope than the Australian survey so for some of the analysis we have used the 1998 Forms of Employment Survey. Although this survey has been repeated more recently (2001), at the time of writing (2004) the Australian Bureau of Statistics had not made the data available to academic users. Consequently, for reasons of comparability, when Australian data is derived from the Forms of Employment Survey, we use UK Labour Force data from 1998 even though we are able to access data from 2003. In terms of the analysis, it is important to note that in both countries rates of unemployment were significantly higher in 1998 than they are at the moment.

In both Australia and the UK levels of unemployment for young people and adults are currently lower than they have been for several decades. In the first quarter of 2004, the number of working age people classified as unemployed stood at 4.7 per cent in the UK and 5.7 per cent in Australia.¹ Of course aggregate figures can draw our attention away from areas in which structural unemployment is extremely high and from sections of the population who tend to experience levels of unemployment that are some way above the average. Young people in particular tend to experience levels of unemployment that are around twice as high as for those experienced by older workers. While unemployment rates are frequently used as an indicator of the 'health' of labour markets, they provide a very partial picture and can lead us to overlook the extent to which groups of people are being marginalised or trapped within precarious sectors of the labour market. In a buoyant labour market we may find groups of workers who rarely encounter unemployment yet fail to make in-roads to relatively secure sectors of the economy or to the types of employment that will equip them with transferable skills. In a depressed labour market these same groups of people may encounter protracted periods of unemployment. Furthermore, unemployment rates provide no indication of the quality of jobs being entered, or of the level of security offered. Indeed, the Brazilianisation thesis partially rests on the argument that lower unemployment rates are being achieved on the basis of increased insecurity, poverty and socio-economic polarisation with the dichotomy between employment and unemployment being less and less relevant.

As the Brazilianisation metaphor would suggest, unemployment rates in Australia and the UK have been falling since the mid-1990s, and in the UK the discrepancy between male and female unemployment rates have narrowed (Figure 1). In 1995, unemployment rates for males in the UK were in double figures while female unemployment stood at 7 per cent. In Australia unemployment among males and females stood at 9 and 8 per cent respectively. By 2003 unemployment rates in both countries were between 4 and 6 per cent.

Figure 1



Source: UK and Australian Labour Force Survey, via ILO Laborsta.

The above trends relate to all people of working age and figures for younger workers are always around twice as high. There are a number of reasons for this, including the fact that young workers are trying to get a toe hold in the labour market, that they may lack the skills and experience of older workers and that employers can perceive them as being less reliable and in need of greater supervision and control (Ashton et al., 1982; HRSCEET 1997). In 2002, for example, more than 10 per cent of males aged 16-19 in the UK and Australia were unemployed while for females in this age group unemployment among the British and Australians stood at 7 and 9 per cent respectively (Table 1). Levels of unemployment among 20-24 year-olds were significantly lower while among 25-29 year-olds rates of unemployment were not far off the national averages.

In many respects unemployment rates are a poor reflection of the opportunities available to young people. Young people may prolong their education in the knowledge that few opportunities exist and governments are able to keep unemployment rates within politically acceptable limits by ‘encouraging’ various forms of non-participation. Expansion of higher education is an effective

strategy for reducing the number of economically active young people and hence promoting an illusion of job ‘creation’.

Table 1: Unemployment rates by age group and gender, 2002: Australia and UK (%).

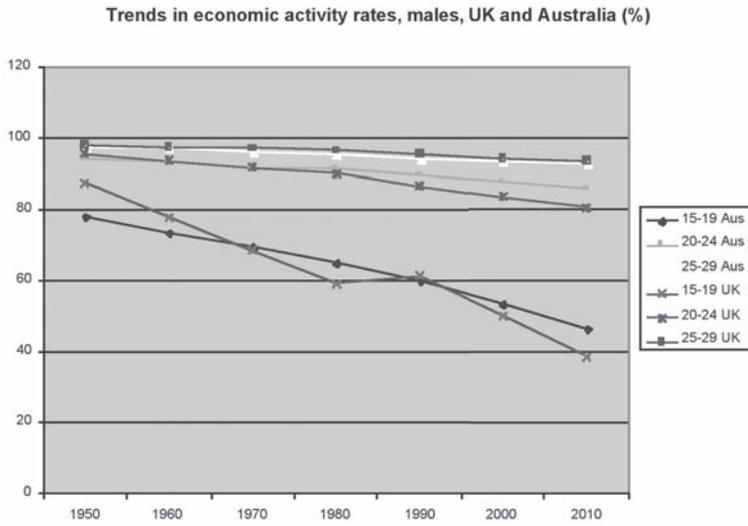
		Males	Females
15-19	Australia	10.4	9
16-19	UK	10.3	7
20-24	Australia	9.4	7
20-24	UK	8.4	4.7
25-29	Australia	6.9	5
25-29	UK	4.8	3.7

Source: UK and Australian Labour Force Survey, via ILO Laborsta.

In the 1950s, in Australia and the UK, the majority of young men entered the labour market at the end of the period of compulsory schooling. They would then remain in the labour market until retirement at age 65 or later. As such, in this period rates of labour market participation among males were extremely high. More than 90 per cent of those aged 20 or above were economically active in both the UK and Australia (Figures 2 and 3). With minimum age school leaving being the norm, in the UK 87 per cent of 15-19 year-olds were economically active while in Australia participation rates were lower at 78 per cent. In both countries, female patterns of participation were very different. They too would tend to leave school at age 15 and enter the labour market although even among 15-19 year-olds rates of participation were lower than for males: 81 per cent in the UK and 66 per cent in Australia. In the 1950s there was a tendency for young women to withdraw from the labour market once they had children (or for some as soon as they got married). As such, rates of labour market activity were relatively low among young adults and were lower in Australia than in the UK. Among 25-29 year-olds, for example, just 24 per cent of young women in Australia were economically active as compared to 39 per cent in the UK.

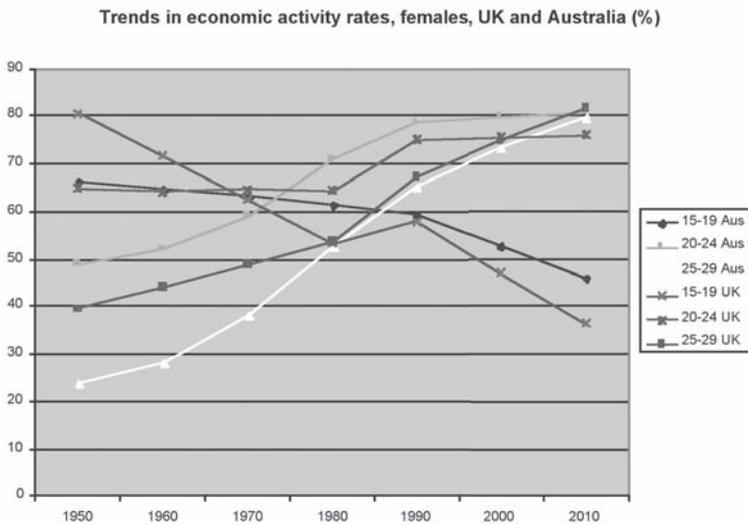
From the 1950s onwards economic activity rates for young males continued to fall, mainly as a result of more protracted educational participation with post-compulsory participation becoming the norm and higher education being transformed from an elite to a mass experience, particularly for the middle classes. Educational participation rates are forecast to grow in both countries over the coming decade leading to a further decline in labour market participation rates. For women the post-1950s trend has been more complex. Women have also become more likely to participate in post-compulsory and higher education and enter higher education. This has led to a decrease in economic activity rates which are particularly visible among 15-19 year-olds. Young women over the age of 20 have also been affected by these trends but they are concealed by a much stronger counterbalancing trend: the tendency to have children later and remain economically active whilst caring for children which has resulted in a strong increase in rates of labour market activity.

Figure 2



Source: UK and Australian Labour Force Survey, via ILO Laborsta.

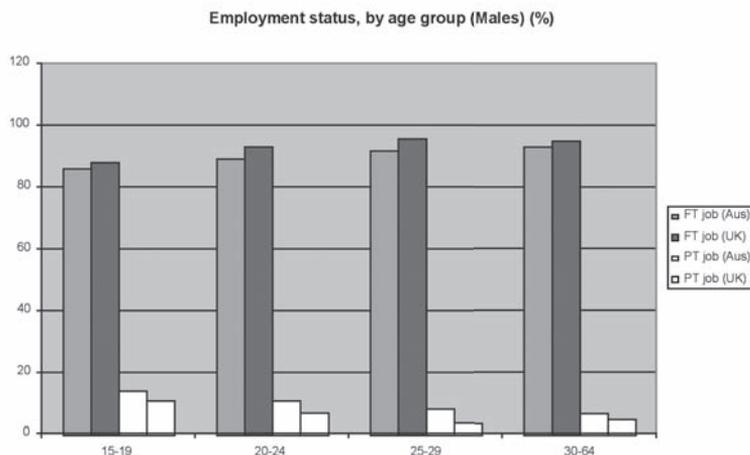
Figure 3



Source: UK and Australian Labour Force Survey, via ILO Laborsta.

Beck's (2000) thesis suggests that we need to look beyond rates of unemployment and economic activity to more fully comprehend the changing nature of youth transitions. This further analysis should examine forms of labour market attachment and the nature of contractual statuses. The sorts of labour market fragmentation implied by the Brazilianisation thesis are likely to involve a relatively high level of participation in part-time work with workers sometimes holding a number of part-time positions simultaneously in order to earn a reasonable living. In Australia and the UK the vast majority of males in employment (almost nine in ten in the youngest age group and more than nine in ten in the others) were working full-time (those supporting study with part-time employment have been excluded) (Figure 4). In each age group part-time working was more common in Australia, but the overall differences were small.

Figure 4

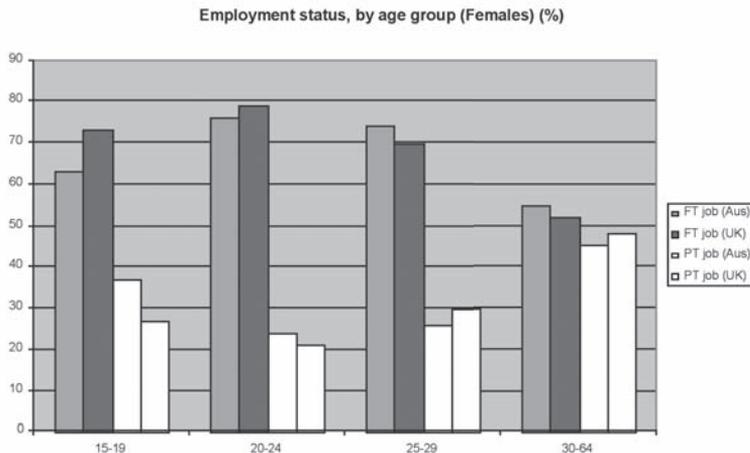


Source: Australian Forms of Employment Survey, 1998 and UK Labour Force Survey 1999.

The patterns of employment among females were quite different both in comparison with the males and between the two countries. Females in both countries and in all age groups were less likely than the males to be employed full-time (Figure 5). In Australia, nearly four in ten 15-19 year-olds were working part-time, yet in the UK the figure was much lower at just over one in four (although the national differences among other groups are rather small). In both countries, rates of part-time employment rose significantly among the 30 plus age group, probably reflecting patterns of labour market re-entry following a period of child care. With a very small proportion of the younger age groups likely to be working part-time due to childcare responsibilities we can only speculate as to the reasons why they are more likely than males to work part-time. One possible explanation is that young women in both countries are more likely than young men to prefer part-time work. Another (perhaps more likely) explanation is that women's jobs are heavily concentrated in those parts of the service sector where full-time employment is relatively uncommon. With a greater prevalence

of part-time working among the youngest age group in Australia, it seems likely that there are fewer opportunities for young women to work full-time in Australia and, perhaps, that the female youth labour market in Australia is more casualised.

Figure 5



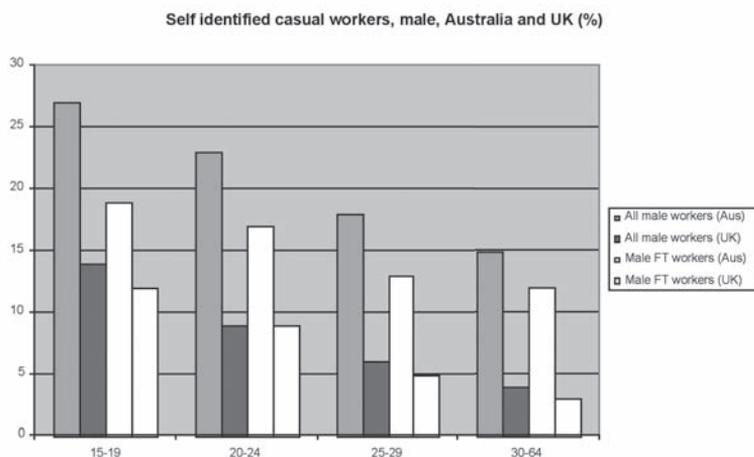
Source: Australian Forms of Employment Survey, 1998 and UK Labour Force Survey 1999.

The issue of casualisation is an important one and is a significant element of the Brazilianisation thesis – both in terms of the objective characterisation of labour market opportunities, and the structured, subjective experience of these opportunities. Casualisation, though, is not a straightforward concept. It is defined differently in Australia and the UK and legislative definitions may conflict with the views that workers hold of their situations. In Australia casual jobs are widely recognised as forms of employment in which workers have no rights to holiday or sick pay (Wooden and Warren, 2003; Campbell, 2004). While on the surface this may seem a clear indicator of a disadvantaged status, some workers will prefer casual forms of employment as they carry a wage premium to compensate for the lack of ‘usual’ rights such as holidays and sick pay. In other words, casual workers include what we may refer to as ‘flexible’ workers whose skills may be in high demand and who use this to their own advantage. Casual workers also include those who have few choices and who occupy precarious positions as a consequence of their lack of resources. The combination of different groups of workers within the casual sector is also true in the UK, except that in the UK there is no right (and often no expectation) that casual employment will attract a pay premium and it is not uncommon for casual workers to accrue holiday and sick pay entitlements (see Campbell 2004 for a more detailed discussion of the definitional problems associated with a cross national comparative analysis of casualisation).

Recognising that the terms may mean slightly different things in the two countries, the data we use relies on workers' self identification as casual workers. This group of workers are perhaps the tip of an iceberg of casuals in that many others may regard themselves as holding secure employment while lacking core rights such as protection against unfair dismissal. In the UK, for example, full employment rights are only granted to workers after one year's continuous employment with the same employer even where such workers hold a 'permanent' contract. Despite these concerns about the robustness of the information on casual workers, the data we use are currently the best available and they do allow us to make an educated assessment of the extent to which casual employment has become established as a new form of working.

Among male workers in all age groups casual employment is more common in Australia than in the UK (Figure 6). These are not differences that are confined to the younger age groups and apply equally to prime age workers. In Australia, for example, 27 per cent of 15-19 year-olds worked casually, compared to 15 per cent of 30-64 year-olds. In the UK the comparable figures were 14 per cent and 4 per cent. If we exclude those working part-time, levels of casualisation are lower in both countries, although the overall pattern is very similar.

Figure 6



Source: Australian Forms of Employment Survey, 1998 and UK Labour Force Survey 1999.

The picture for females is quite different, especially in Australia among the youngest age group (Figure 7). Just over four in ten 15-19 year-old women in employment are identified as casuals although among the older age groups the level of casualisation is similar to that described among Australian males. In the UK, differences between males and females are not pronounced for any age group. For females as for males, levels of casualisation are much higher in Australia than in the UK. If part-time workers are excluded, levels of

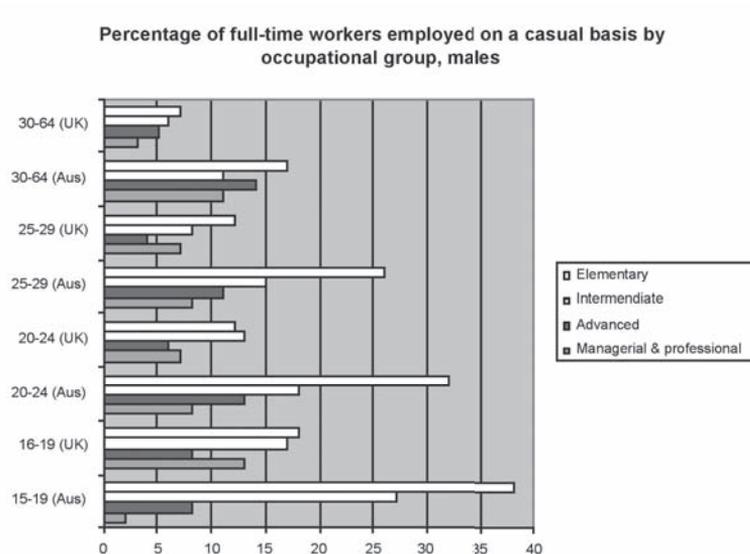
casualisation fall dramatically, especially in Australia, showing a strong link between part-time employment and casual forms of employment.

Figure 7



Source: Australian Forms of Employment Survey, 1998 and UK Labour Force Survey 1999.

Figure 8

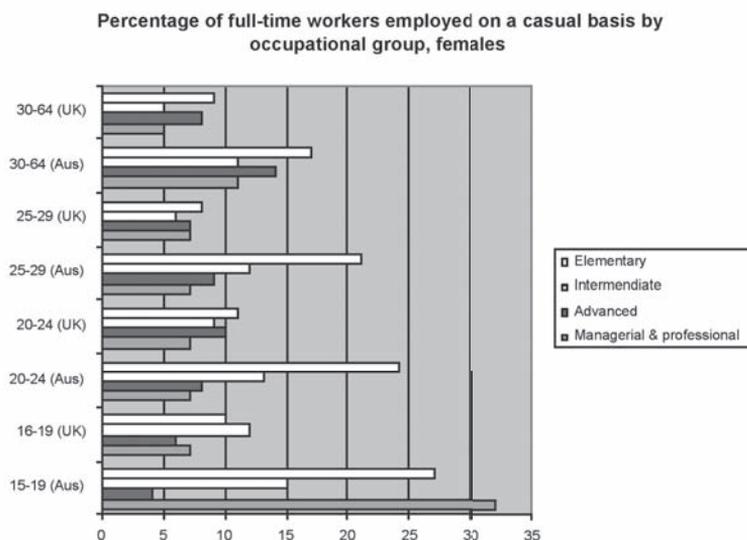


Source: Australian Forms of Employment Survey, 1998 and UK Labour Force Survey 1999.

While there seems to be a tendency for casual workers to be concentrated within part-time employment, it is also important to see whether there are some occupations in which casualised forms of working have become particularly significant. Among male workers casual forms of working were heavily concentrated in elementary and intermediate occupations: relatively low skill jobs where rates of pay are low and where levels of jobs security can be poor even when workers have ‘permanent’ contracts (Figure 8). The occupational distribution of casual work was similar in Australia and the UK, although even in low skill jobs levels of casualisation were higher in Australia.

The occupational distribution of females in the two countries was very similar to that of males, with one noticeable exception (Figure 9). Among 15-19 year-olds in managerial and professional occupations levels of casualisation in Australia were almost as high as in elementary occupations. This was not true among Australian males and suggests something very specific about entry level jobs in the female professional and managerial occupations.

Figure 9



Source: Australian Forms of Employment Survey, 1998 and UK Labour Force Survey 1999.

Youth transitions and the Brazilianisation thesis

Crucial to the Brazilianisation thesis is the fact that, for all the cultural oppositions and incomparabilities, the future of informality now dawning in the West has a long tradition in South America and can be observed there in all its ambivalence. (Beck 2000, p97)

In this paper we have provided an empirical analysis of the labour market experiences of young people in the UK and Australia. The analysis has been

informed by key elements of Beck's Brazilianisation thesis. The principal concern of the analysis has been to encourage further discussion about the ways in which youth transitions can be understood in light of these early labour market experiences. Young people are over-represented in less secure forms of employment. They are more likely to hold temporary contracts, work in the casual sectors of the labour market, in areas where their education or skills are not fully utilised or obtain fewer hours employment than they would ideally like. These problems are not new but the idea that precarious forms of labour market engagement are rapidly becoming typical experiences is central to Beck's thesis and, as a consequence, it can be argued that the life course has become more fluid, flexible and unpredictable.

Our analysis enables us to compare emerging trends in a country (Australia) in which a Liberal (Conservative) Government has encouraged 'flexibility' by progressively removing or weakening employment protection legislation with a country (UK) that, being constrained by legislative principles enshrined in the European 'constitution', has been forced to retain some key principles of employment security. In this respect Australia, with a highly casualised labour force, is more similar to the USA than to the 'old' Europe as represented by the fifteen countries that made up the European Union prior to 2004. Campbell's (2004) analysis arrives at a similar conclusion. He argues that 'rates of casualisation in Australia are indeed highly unusual phenomena' when compared with other OECD countries. Moreover, this situation is 'unnecessary and unwelcome, and represents a 'significant labour market problem' (pp 21-22).

The negative life course consequences of casualisation are readily identifiable both in Australia and in OECD countries that actively discourage casualisation via policy interventions. In Australia the Australian Council of Trades Unions (ACTU 2004) cites a Job Futures/Saulwick Employment Sentiment Survey that reported 54 per cent of casual workers would prefer full time or part time permanent employment. The ACTU also cites ABS surveys which indicated that: 75 per cent of casuals would prefer more regular patterns of work; more than 50 per cent of casual workers have been in their jobs more than a year; 61 per cent of casuals have to deal with on-going variations in weekly earnings and; only 35 per cent of casuals are buying their own home compared with 60 per cent of workers with permanent jobs. Campbell (2004) reports on countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands which are rethinking labour market regulation around notions of 'flexicurity' – a concept that seeks to engage with competing demands for flexibility and security via legislation such the Dutch *Flexibility and Security Act* of 1999.

So what can we make of the Brazilianisation thesis in relation to understanding the nature and consequences of Youth transitions into increasingly precarious labour markets? Beck's framework for analysing a political economy of insecurity can indicate where this thinking might lead. Most importantly academic and policy discussions should shift analysis and discussion away from a primary, even sole, concern with rates of unemployment, or rates of participation and economic activity. Such discussions quickly bog down in claims that any job

is better than no job, or that life choices for young people are reduced to either 'earning' or 'learning' (as Australia's then Federal Opposition Leader Mark Latham suggested in the 2004 Federal election campaign).

Taking a lead from Beck, if technologically advanced capitalism threatens, in the end, any and all jobs, and labour markets reflect this precarity, what will adult biographies lived in fragments *feel* like? What stories about education, training, transition and adulthood will engage young people whose first experiences of labour markets are characterised by casualisation? If the risks associated with labour market participation and economic activity are increasingly individualised, and marked by new responsibilities and obligations for life long learning, flexibility and activity, how can policy and academic discussions recognise that individualised biographies continue to be shaped by social divisions (Bauman 2001)? A focus on Youth transitions in policy and academic discussion that is informed by a political economy of insecurity would highlight the problematic, and differing, characteristics of choice, flexibility and activity for different groups of young people. Characteristics that are shaped by existing and historical patterns of disadvantage and exclusion, and which have different consequences for young people depending on their social class, gender, ethnicity, geographic location and, importantly, age.

Conclusion

Our analysis has shown that the process of casualisation is not an all-pervasive one. It is a process that is having the greatest impact on the weakest labour market participants. It affects young women more than young men, but is also concentrated in the lowest skilled occupations, and in particular sections of a service labour market. In other words, we are not so much observing a process in which people are selecting 'flexible' forms of employment that are suited to a modern life style in which work-life balances have become increasingly important. Rather, we are encountering a process by which less advantaged positions in the labour market are made even more precarious through various policy and regulatory processes.

The consequences of these emerging labour market trends are uncertain, and uneven in their appearance. However, their appearance should provoke community, academic and policy discussions to consider the concept of youth transitions in new ways. Transition, which is itself a metaphor, takes on new meanings if the paid labour market – as a space of arrival – is increasingly a space marked by uncertainty, precarity and ambivalence. In addition this precariousness should be understood as a structured phenomenon – flexibility is different to precarity, and it is different because the nature and consequences of choices are different for different populations in different locations with different labour market opportunity structures.

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Footnote

- ¹ UK figures are derived from the Labour Force Survey and reported by Statistics.gov.uk. Australian figures are provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (6202.0 13/05/04).