

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

WILEY

# Migration, precariousness, and the linked lives of newcomers in Hong Kong

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## Funding information

Hong Kong Government Research Grant Council, Grant/Award Number: 12646816

## Abstract

We develop the concept of linked lives to deepen understanding of the relationship between migration and precarity. Linked lives and precariousness are mutually constitutive as they embed subjects in the social, spatial, and temporal relations of everyday life while referencing transitions, trajectories, and biographies that unfold through the life course. Studying linked lives draws attention to how cumulative social and cultural processes, including familyhood and belonging, contribute to the persistence of precarity. On the basis of 64 qualitative interviews with selected newcomer migrants in Hong Kong, we describe how precariousness was not just restricted to exploitative employment or limited rights but enveloped multiple domains of everyday life, including housing and social fields. Respondents associated precariousness with feelings of generalised pressure and disrupted spacetimes and connected it with their expectations for familyhood, employment, social life, and belonging. We argue that the mutual constitution of precariousness and linked lives has important implications for social policy and close with a call for the creation of resourceful spacetimes that support linked lives and, more widely, a more participatory process of formulating social policy for migrants.

## KEYWORDS

belonging, China, legal status, life course, migration, precarity

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Many of the world's cross-border and international migrants experience insecurity and instability in their everyday lives. These insecurities have significant and widely recognised implications for unemployment, family instability, and physical and mental health (United Nations, 2016). While uncertainty and instability is a taken-for-granted aspect of the individual experience of migration from at least Ravenstein forward, research now characterises these instabilities as structural forms of precarity that arise, for example, from exploitative labour markets and differentiated legal rights (Lewis, Dwyer, Hodkinson, & Waite, 2015; Silvey & Parreñas, 2019). Under-scored by how the triple conjunction of the 2008 global recession,

austerity policies, and COVID-19 retraction is intensifying such precarity, this paper aims to deepen the understanding of the relationship between migration and precarity.

Research approaches precarity as an encounter in the “zone of translation between Fordism, social welfare, and life ... [and] an ontological experience and socio-economic condition with multiple registers” (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008, p. 55). Life course scholarship, with its interest in how processes unfold through individual lives, illuminates how migrants negotiate this “zone of translation” (Elder, 1994, p. 6; Findlay, McCollum, Coulter, & Gayle, 2015). For example, and concerning the impact of legal status on migrant's opportunities, Goldring and Landolt note that precarity “shows a cumulative, non-linear path dependent effect ... where prior

locations have the potential to exert long-term effects, [and] transitions may continue to occur indefinitely over the life-course" (2011, p. 326). Life course further examines the intersection of structural processes, institutions, and agency identified in accounts of precariousness (Butler, 2004). Our specific argument is that linked lives disrupt social, spatial, and temporal relations and change subjectivity and meaning in ways that respond to and influence precarisation (Coulter, Ham, & Findlay, 2016).

Our paper builds on scholarship on the diverse experiences of precarity among migrants and extends life course theory (Näsström & Kalm, 2015; Zeiderman, Kaker, Silver, & Wood, 2015). We go beyond seeing precarity as "inflected" in life worlds or classified according to domain and examine the cumulative ways in which precariousness unfolds through the intersections of linked lives (Chacko & Price, 2020, p. 8; Standing, 2011; Waite, 2009). As Paret and Gleeson (2016) note, "rather than examine inequality to better understand the migrant experience, we examine the migrant experience to better understand precarity" (p. 278). Moreover, as precariousness produces subjectivity and non-linear and unstable meanings of space and time that are accumulated through biography (Hörschelmann, 2011), and as these biographies guide everyday life, we regard linked lives and precariousness as mutually constituting. As such, we extend accounts of life course as a structuring aspect of social life (Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999).

The conceptual underpinning of our argument also carries impact for how social policy addresses migration. While research shows that precarisation among migrants has been intensified by the neoliberal context of restrictive and even punitive social policy, we further explore how social policy connects with precarisation through life course trajectories (Eleveld, 2012; Gibney, 2009). We use this understanding to outline how social policy can mediate the precarity-linked experiences of migrants' daily social, spatial, and temporal relations by giving institutional support to the co-production of resourceful spacetimes (Cirolia, Gorgens, van Donk, Smit, & Drimie, 2016).

The paper explores the relationship between migration and precarity using empirical evidence from the exceptional case of migrants arriving in the Chinese SAR of Hong Kong. Experiences of precarity among particular migrant groups in the city are tied to the continuing delivery of a neoliberal and liberal welfarist model in employment, housing, and residence rights (Grange, 2010). The provision of social policy support to migrants is restricted and strictly determined by migrant legal status. For example, recently arrived migrants are ineligible for public housing, whereas those seeking asylum are forbidden to work (Jordan, DeVerteuil, Kandt, Manley, & Wu, 2017; Law & Lee, 2006). Given the salience of legal status, we focus on the experiences of precariousness among five groups of migrants with restricted access to opportunity: asylum seekers, domestic workers, tied migrants, one-way and two-way permit migrants from mainland China, and overstayers. Moreover, as our framework draws attention to how precariousness is connected with linked lives, we focus on the daily lives of migrants as they first move to Hong Kong and negotiate the de-

and re-linking of their lives, that is, "newcomer" migrants (Kobayashi & Deng, 2019).

## 2 | PRECARIOUSNESS AND LINKED LIVES

Scholarship that describes "migrant precarity" has emphasised socio-economic and ontological aspects of instability, lack of protection, insecurity, and vulnerability (Rodgers & Rodgers, 1989, p. 5). Migrants encounter precarity in exploitative and unequally structured labour, housing, and loan markets (Anderson, 2010; Wilson, Beck, & Bailey, 2009). Research increasingly demonstrates that experiences and meanings of precarity are diverse, including "unfree life" (Harker, 2012), productive ambiguity (Simone, 2011), and possibility (Hardgrove, Rootham, & McDowell, 2015). Some critical approaches to theorising such diversity analyse everyday life to offer a balanced account of structure and agency (Butler, 2012; Ettlinger, 2007; Munoz, 2018). For migrants, state exclusions and regulations, many socio-legal in nature, direct the conduct of everyday life (Bhabha, 2002; De Genova, 2004). Elsewhere, everyday life and "daily performance" have been described as a means of "locating within precarity the seeds of alternative futures" (Amich, 2014, p. 140).

We develop this critical scholarship by considering how experiences of precarity in everyday life index spatial and temporal meanings (Strauss, 2018; Vasudevan, 2015). Bailey, Drbohlav, and Salukvadze, 2018 show how the gendered migration of Georgians was regulated by pastoral power acting through spatialised norms of care and transnational familyhood and originating from state and non-state institutions, including the European Union supranational and the Georgian Orthodox Church. Studies also show how migrants purposefully manipulate the spatial meanings in everyday life to mitigate precariousness. De Moor (2016) describes how newly resident squatters control the access to, and the practices of, their squats in order to create spatial meanings that re-work the legal precariousness of their squatting. Harney (2013) notes that while developments in information and communication technology expose migrants to new forms of surveillance and uncertainty, they can also be used to bring greater virtual connectivity and thereby reduce isolation in work places.

However, while flagging spatial and temporal meanings, these accounts do not theorise how precariousness is reproduced or why it may persist (a recent exception is Silvey & Parreñas, 2019). This gap is noteworthy concerning migration given empirical evidence pointing to the longer-term impacts of precariousness. Goldring and Landolt (2011) report that immigrants to Toronto who entered Canada with precarious legal status were more likely to experience precarious work than those who entered with secure legal status, even as their legal status became more secure. Wright (2016) describes how cycles of poverty and inequality that flow across the life span are associated with intergenerational transfers of material and non-material resources. More widely, cumulative causation, embeddedness, and path dependence have been associated with migration and the organisation of migrant communities (Massey, 1986; Tsuda, 1999).

We turn to life course to theorise the diverse experiences of precarities and how these are reproduced (O'Rand, 2009). To do this, we further develop the concept of linked lives, understood as the purposeful and regulated intersection of life course trajectories, transitions, events, and biographies in everyday life (Elder, 1994; Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; George, 1996; Jarvis, 2005; Mortimer & Shanahan, 2007). Our specific argument is that the linking of lives produces subjectivity in relation to the simultaneous embedding of the human life in interdependent social, spatial, and temporal relations (after Coulter et al., 2016; Dolan, 2010; Settersten, 2015). Precariousness arises from the intersection of life course trajectories, transitions, events, and biographies in two ways. First, it indexes disruptions in the social, spatial, and temporal relations that underpin embeddedness of self in society and subjectivity. Second, as precariousness is encountered and experienced in daily life, and is thereby woven into spatial and temporal meanings that structure biography, it may cumulatively shape subsequent events, transitions, and trajectories (Jarvis, 1999). We posit a mutually constitutive relationship between precariousness and the linking of lives (see also Coulter et al., 2016, p. 356).

This enlarged concept of linked lives avoids privileging the "event" of migration in accounting for migrant precarity. It draws attention to trajectories (i.e., projects and careers) that unfold over the life span, such as familyhood, work, and belonging, and transitions that involve ordered and organised changes to norms and identities and include arriving and living in a new place of residence (Bailey, 2009). It attends to how precarity flows through the intersection of biographies (defined as narrations of the subjective and social meanings of events) with transitions and trajectories to produce memory, aspiration, consequence, and meaning and, as such, to give integrity and purpose to life course.

We assess the linked lives concept by deriving and empirically testing three research propositions. First, precariousness is encountered in multiple domains of everyday life and experienced affectively (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008: pp. 64–65; Shubin, 2015). Here, we understand everyday life is the locus of "webs of action spaces," where social, spatial, and temporal relations that underpin subjectivity are invoked and directed (Andrucki & Dahlstein, 2014: p. 210; Collins, 2018; Jarvis, 2005). Among migrants, precariousness unfolds across multiple socio-economic domains and webs of exploitation and insecurity (Roy, 2015) that include employment, finance, socio-legality, and housing, and ontologically, such as the unknowability of waiting times for legal status upgrading or confirmation (Chacko & Price, 2020; Piper & Lee, 2016). Affective indices of precariousness include feelings of isolation (Kennett & Mizuuchi, 2010), tenuousness (Cruz-Del Rosario & Rigg, 2019), and drift (Ferrell, 2012; Mas Giralt & Bailey, 2010).

Second, precariousness emerges as the social, spatial, and temporal relations that are encountered and experienced as part of the unfolding of linked lives in everyday life are different from those expected. That is, through biography, migrants build a purposeful set of expectations about the social, spatial, and temporal characteristics of intersections between life course transitions and trajectories

in everyday life (Elder, 1994: p. 6). These expectations include aspirations, calibrated on the basis of past experience and imagination, and social norms, regulated through governmentality and cultural practices (Sigona, 2012, p. 62). As everyday life experiences fall short of expectations, the integrity of biography and life course for generating expectations and meanings is undermined, infusing subjectivity with insecurity and precariousness. For example, the actual lived spatial arrangements of families during transition to a new place may not meet aspirations of togetherness and norms of co-presence that are part of a migrant's familyhood trajectory (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). The speed and sequence of intersections between residential transition and employment trajectories may not meet gendered norms for dependent and tied migrants (McCollum, 1990).

Third, precariousness is reproduced through trajectories of belonging. Individuals make sense of emerging subjectivity, including experiences of precariousness, as their unfolding biographies convey "ruptures and discontinuities, rather than assumed predictability" (Hörschelmann, 2011, pp. 378–379). Such biographical discontinuities will affect how the spatial and temporal relations of trajectories of home and belonging are experienced and felt as precariousness (Anthias, 2002; Zontini, 2015). Indeed, research suggests that belonging intersects with other life course trajectories to diversify the pathways through which precariousness is reproduced. Buhler (2014, p. 1) argues that by "smiling" and exerting agency through creating home migrants both improve their lives and gain a "sense of stability." Tsuda describes how Brazilian migrants negotiate restrictive Japanese immigration regulations by embracing biographies of return ideology that shape a paradoxical trajectory of permanent belonging through successive temporary spells of residence in Japan (1999, p. 711). However, research also suggests that governmentalities of deportability and permanent temporariness increase precariousness as expected spatial and temporal meanings are disrupted by not meeting norms of remitting and co-presence (Bailey, Wright, Mountz, & Miyares, 2002; De Genova, 2004).

### 3 | METHOD

Our data were collected as part of a cross-national comparison of the experiences of migrants in Hong Kong, Atlanta, and Tshwane (see Bailey, De Beer, & Hankins, 2018; Bailey, Drbohlav, & Salukvadze, 2018). Newcomer migrants represent an exceptional case of the diversity of experiences of precariousness connected with migration. The city is among the highest levels of income equality globally, and while employment rates are high for the general population, unemployment, underemployment, and insecure employment have been described among groups of migrants (Ou & Pong, 2013; Siu, 2008). Similarly, low-income groups are unable to afford housing, and many have to live in overcrowded and deteriorating subdivided units (so-called "cage homes") where they face exploitation from landlords (Society for Community Organization [SoCO], 2013). Discrimination against particular groups, including those from mainland China, persists

(Law & Lee, 2006; SoCO, 2004). During our research between July 2016 and July 2019, the long-running anxiety about the changing relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China intensified and deepened insecurities, including about the “Hong Kong way of life” (Ren, 2010). Moreover, the restrictive liberal welfare model that ties provision to legal status means that many migrants to the city receive little support. Migrants who are not permanent residents (the vast majority) are ineligible for unemployment benefits or access to public housing (SoCO, 2017). The provision of non-governmental support is geographically concentrated and, with the reality of low wages, high housing costs and long working hours, largely inaccessible (Jordan et al., 2017).

That legal status has been shown to influence precariousness led us to focus on five status-defined groups. Asylum seekers are forbidden to work, and the modest stipend they are provided for rent does not cover costs (Stepkova, 2018). Domestic workers have no access to permanent residence and are contractually obliged to live in their employer's abode (Ladegaard, 2016). Dependent status migrants can remain and work in Hong Kong but only as long as their spouse remains. Many low-skilled migrants from mainland China hold one-way or two-way permit visas, which restrict their mobility and entitlements (Gibney, 2009; Sussman, 2010). We also recruited overstayers, a group subject to instant deportation if detected by the police for breaking their terms of entry: Among their ranks were low income and domestic workers whose contract had expired or been terminated. Our study did not consider those entering Hong Kong under the following schemes: the Quality Migrant Admission Scheme (QMAS), the Admission Scheme for Mainland Talents and Professionals (ASMTTP), the Capital Investment Entrant Scheme (CIES), and as General Economic Migrants.

We interviewed a diverse range of respondents from these groups who had just arrived in the city. Newly arriving is associated with de-linking and re-linking lives. Newcomer migrants have been found to be exploited because they are prepared to work harder and longer for less, in turn, due to constrained choices and competition from other low-waged workers (Lewis et al., 2015, p. 583). We defined newcomer migrants as those over the age of 18 who had been living in the city for 12 or fewer months at the time of our (initial) interview.

To locate suitable respondents, we worked closely with a five-person steering group. The group's voluntary members included those with knowledge of Hong Kong's migrant communities and social policy. They recommended we focused recruitment on two districts To Kwa Wan and Yuen Long with the different groups of arriving migrants. To Kwa Wan is an inner city location with employment in light industry and hospitality and levels of deprivation near the Hong Kong average. Yuen Long is an established market town located five miles from the mainland border in the northwest of the New Territories and has the second highest level of deprivation among Hong Kong's Districts (Census and Statistics Department [CSD], 2017). Respondents were recruited through personal contacts with a non-governmental organisation that supports urban redevelopment projects, through contacts with school-based social workers

who specialise in supporting families of newcomers, by using church and business-based networks suggested by the steering group and by the snowball method.

Our long interviews had questions on major topics of everyday life including socio-economic, educational, and family background, health status, and geographic profile; housing and living arrangements; work and financial arrangements; family and social networks; area and community characteristics; and sense of belonging. We probed for respondent views, experiences, and feelings on these topics and, more widely, on their values and short- and medium-term aspirations. We did not explicitly ask questions about precarity, but we did ask open-ended questions about the best and worst aspects of everyday life and followed up these answers with more detailed questions. Many interviews were conducted in the lunch hour when migrants finished bringing children to school or before their grocery shopping and in the evening after work. The interviews were conducted in Putonghua, Cantonese or English. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min. We supplemented these interviews with field notes and made use of secondary data sources, specialised government surveys, and media reports on relevant issues.

We completed 64 interviews and anonymised the responses. Pseudonyms were assigned by different members of the research team to protect respondent anonymity while maintaining some association with the circumstance of the interview. Some pseudonyms were based on those commonly adopted English names that prevailed among particular groups. Our analysis followed the grounded theory method by interpreting narratives iteratively in light of relevant scholarship. We read a small number of transcripts to identify broad themes related to our objective. Key themes (e.g., the cramped living conditions) were written in the margins of the transcripts, and phrases associated with these themes (e.g., pressure) were underlined in different colours. We then explored a larger number of transcripts to refine the themes and examine the resonance of the themes/categories with prior literature. More interviews were conducted to address gaps and processes of interest. In this study, we added interviews with recently arrived mainland-born migrants to better understand the theme of family-linked pressures that had emerged from initial interviews. When significant changes to the coding occurred, the earlier underlined and coded interviews were re-read in light of new themes. We shared these findings with the steering group and took their views about the wider geographic, historic, and cultural context into account in analysing and presenting the final results.

## 4 | ENCOUNTERS AND EXPERIENCES OF PRECARIOUSNESS IN DAILY LIFE

Our respondents spoke of insecurity and instability in multiple domains of their daily life, notably housing, work, socio-legality, and social life. Affective dimensions of precariousness arose through social relations (e.g., isolation and lacking friends), spatial relations (e.g., feeling caged), and temporal relations (e.g., lacking permanent employment or residence).

All our respondents encountered insecurities in their housing arrangements. Faced with limited access and limited means, many respondents rented small units in the private sector. All respondents lived in shared arrangements. The size of living spaces ranged from a maximum of 700 ft<sup>2</sup> (shared by two people) to a minimum of 60 ft<sup>2</sup> (a subdivided flat shared by three). Ben, an asylum seeker from Viet Nam, stayed with his wife Lara and young daughter in a subdivided room in one of the city's privately-owned *Tong Lau* tenements. Their room was near the top of the building that had been constructed in the 1950s, and, with no elevator, reaching it meant they had to walk up an unlit stairway strewn with discarded bikes, household rubbish, and anti-foreigner slogans. The room had no windows, poor ventilation, lacked regular management oversight or maintenance, and featured illegal plumbing and fittings, including a separate metre that enabled the landlord to levy his own extra charge for water and electricity.

Less than one half of our respondents were in paid employment, in line with our expectation, and significantly below the official unemployment rate, which ranged between 2.8% and 3.1% during the period of fieldwork. Of those being paid, one-third had no formal employment contract. For example, Asif had arrived a few months before on a tourist visa from Pakistan and worked informally and irregularly in construction. Polly, whose mainland-born husband also worked in construction, said their "income is not stable; sometimes my husband earns more and sometimes less. For example, if it rains, he has no work" (Transcript 2, p. 7). In common with other asylum seekers, Ben told us he had already exhausted his limited savings and was working irregularly in a nearby industrial unit at night to earn cash to feed his family. Lacking a regular income stream, or any certainty about his future time in Hong Kong, Asif had taken on loans from two members of the local Pakistani community.

A number of newcomers, especially overstayers and asylum seekers, felt very insecure about their legal status. The lack of a work visa forced Asif to rotate between Hong Kong and Pakistan every 3 months, re-enter the city as a tourist, and work informally. Married to Ben and also an asylum seeker from Viet Nam, Lara recounted the most difficult thing about life in Hong Kong was not knowing how long she could stay. The asylum seekers we spoke with were aware that there is no provision for employment for their status but had no choice but to seek gainful employment in order to survive. Some felt a fear of deportation, such as Nia, an asylum seeker living in Yuen Long, who told us that the fear of being stopped by the police meant she seldom went outside her flat, except to go to work. One-way permit holders from mainland China felt disconnected from the city and "like refugees" because, as Polly said, "we do not have the right to apply for public housing" (Transcript 2, p. 9). Respondents reported that uneven enforcement of de jure provisions left them open to exploitation. On paper, domestic workers are issued a standard employment contract outlining hours, holidays, minimum wage, and health provisions. However, on the ground, these de jure legal protections often meant little. Betty had recently entered the city from Bangladesh, having worked previously as a maid in the Middle East, and was told by her boss to "self-insure" for medical costs.

Social life in the wider community carried instability and uncertainty, with reports of discrimination, being beaten up and suffering xenophobia in the months since arriving in Hong Kong. We heard examples of racialised and linguistic prejudice. With mixed Indonesian Malaysian heritage and what she described as "an Asian face" (Transcript 57, p. 7), Lillian said her not reading or speaking Chinese created, in her mind, invisible prejudice when she shopped at the wet market. Taiwanese-born Carman worked at a café in Yuen Long where she said many of her regular customers "had really bad attitudes" (Transcript 60, p. 7) to her because they assumed she was from mainland China: "They said 'can you speak Cantonese?' but I could tell they wanted to put me in disgrace as they know I can't speak Cantonese" (Transcript 60, p. 5). Social life was also characterised by limited social contacts and restricted social fields. For some, the squeeze of spacetime arising from needing to work to pay bills and having little control over when or where to work, coupled with time and cost demands on reaching distant locations, meant opportunities for new social connections were greatly reduced.

While insecurity and instability were identifiable from multiple domains of everyday life, our respondents spoke not of "work precarity" or "housing precarity" per se but of feeling an all-encompassing pressure. This was most frequently alluded to using the phrase 壓迫感 (Cantonese pinyin *Ngaat Bik Gam*, literally, "the pressure"). Richard had recently arrived in Yuen Long from mainland China with a one-way permit entry visa and was working as a manual labourer in a distant warehouse. He lived with his wife, two sons, and his two in-laws in a 210-ft<sup>2</sup> public housing unit, owned by his father-in-law. He described this as

a big pressure ... because 210 square feet divided by six, the space for each of us is actually very, very little [emphasis tone]. I can really feel the pressure (*Ngaat Bik Gam* 壓迫感) ... Every morning is chaos, you know elderly people wake up so early, my daughter needs to go to kindergarten, and I need to go to work. So, I always need to wait for so long just to use the wash-room (Transcript 55, p. 2).

With a long commute, long hours, modest salary, and the daily "chaos" of spacetime pressure, Richard describes a scenario many low-income residents in the city would recognise. The socio-legal constraints he faces as a newcomer migrant mean he lacks options and is forced to stay with his in-laws, even though this exposes him to an additional socio-legal threat, that of eviction. Cruelly, while he faces the strictures of the law, he is unable to benefit from the protections of the law: the de facto amount of living space for each member of Richard's household—around 35 ft<sup>2</sup>—falls well below the Housing Authority's de jure guideline of a minimum of 75 ft<sup>2</sup> (Hong Kong Housing Authority (HA), 2017).

Richard was not the only respondent to characterise their time in Hong Kong as pressure. Sammi had arrived from mainland China 6 months before and introduced herself as a "newcomer migrant" (Transcript 10, p. 4). She had not found paid employment and told us

"it's hard to adapt to the new living ... the most difficult thing is the living pressure in Hong Kong" (Transcript 10, p. 3). The repeated use of the phrase 壓迫感 (pressure) is suggestive because it indexes a common Cantonese register that communicates how the world and its structural forces seem irrevocably aligned against the individual. This term has global provenance because of a YouTube "Bus Uncle" video, which went viral for its depiction of the "pressure" of Hong Kong life. An older bus passenger foully scolds a younger man sitting behind him for, on the surface, patting him on the shoulder and asking him to speak more quietly (Neilson, 2008). During the 10-min tirade, Bus Uncle repeats the phrase "I've pressure, you've pressure, I've got great pressure," as if to acknowledge the structural roots of the pressure that both men share. The resonance between this micro event in the everyday life of Hong Kong and our respondents' experience since arriving in Hong Kong hints at the embeddedness of the pressure.

Further analysis of our transcripts suggests that this feeling of pressure was associated with social, spatial, and temporal relations of everyday life and indexed affectively. Polly said her physical and mental health was worse now than before she arrived in Hong Kong. She also said the restrictive spatial and temporal relations made her feel undignified. She shared the flat with her young son and her husband, but because there was no space for a refrigerator, she had to shop each time the family ate: "We can't even have a cold soft drink, and we have to finish all the food in each meal" (Transcript 2, p. 9). The tight spacetimes of life in the flat also disrupted the coordination of other basic human needs, like intimacy and sleep: "my son sleeps on the lower deck of the bed, while my husband and I sleep at the upper deck ... we don't really have privacy" (Transcript 2, p. 3). Because her partner worked late shifts and typically arrived home in the middle of the night, she had poor sleep. Polly felt enclosed and trapped: "In Hong Kong, I feel like I am locked in a cage. Oppositely, in China, I feel that the sky is bigger" (Transcript 2, p. 2). This sense of being trapped in a cage connected with her loss of dignity: "when we take a shower, we cannot even squat in the washroom" (Transcript 2, p. 3).

The restricted and enforced sleeping arrangements of domestic workers also eroded dignity. Domestic workers experience pressure from their reliance on a single employer for wages, accommodation, and continuing stay in Hong Kong (Stepkova, 2018). Pinky had recently arrived from Indonesia and was required to sleep on the floor in the living room at night. She grew upset when she explained this to us and said it denied her privacy. Betty's employer required her to share a single room of less than 100 ft<sup>2</sup> with two other domestic workers and four dogs: "The room is very small and we are living with the dogs [in the room] ... The dogs are so dirty and smelly" (Transcript 59, p. 4).

Lillian's disrupted temporal relations resonated with the notion of drifting. She had come to Hong Kong to link her life with her new husband and entered on a dependent visa, which gave her the right to work and an expectation that she could further develop her prior work experience in Australia. However, she was frustrated with her new work and on the effect it would have on the speed of her development and expected career position. She said "I am not really enjoying it because I feel like I am not growing anymore." The

negative characterisation of a lack of "continuing progress" in employment, and loss of forward momentum evokes what Ferrell refers to as "drift" (2012) and further resonates with the experiences of a group of migrant teachers who found that life in Korea "accentuated anxiety" as "many lost their sense of life [biography] as stretching from birth to death, and instead were 'floating' and 'drifting'" (Collins & Shubin, 2015, p. 102).

## 5 | LINKED LIVES AND MULTIPLICIOUS PRECARIOUSNESS

This section describes how precariousness arose as the experiences of social, spatial, and temporal relations of our respondent's linked lives ran counter to expectations for the transition to living in Hong Kong. Familyhood trajectories contained aspirations and social norms associated with co-presence, parenthood, and autonomy that were not being met. Similarly, respondents were unable to meet norms of employment trajectories, including livelihood and independence. As each of these aspirations and norms incorporates meaningful social, spatial, and temporal relations, their violation produces multiple pathways of "multiplicious" precariousness as the aspiration or norm itself is undermined, and as the biographical process of meaning making is made less certain.

Co-presence referred to the aspiration and norm that residence in Hong Kong would not disrupt an arrangement whereby individuals who were living under the same roof as part of a family before moving could continue to live together and that those currently living apart could enjoy co-presence after moving. Jenny's familyhood trajectory illustrates the former. She had been living with her husband and children in mainland China, but coming to Hong Kong meant she had to leave them behind. She stayed in a small public housing flat with her mother, in whose name the flat was registered, her father, and another sister. When we asked about how she came to live there, she sighed heavily and repeatedly:

Jenny: We don't have a name on it. We live at my mom's place ... [repeated sigh] ... Indeed, I myself got married already. I have a husband and children, but I cannot bring them to Hong Kong because the flat here is really small ...

Interviewer: Can you describe the flat to me?

Jenny: Um ... [hesitates] ... how should I say? It's not my home ultimately ... [further sigh] ... indeed I got married already. I have a husband and children, they are in Dongguan. It's impossible for my children and husband to live at my mom's place ... (Transcript 54, p. 3).

Her narration of the flat as "really small," "not my home," and "impossible for my children and husband" (Transcript 54, p. 3) was further animated with repeated sighs and hesitation that suggested a feeling of instability and shame. Instability arose not from the housing situation per se but the expectation she had for how the practice of linked lives would synchronise her residential transition in Hong Kong with the sequence of her familyhood trajectory. Having already left her family home, gotten married, and given birth to two children in mainland China, she had expected their co-location would continue in

Hong Kong. It had not. Her double emphasis on “got married *already* [emphasis added]” is significant (Transcript 54, p. 3). Jenny’s biography includes an aspiration that the event of getting married is synchronised with moving to her own home. That she is “married already,” but again re-linking her life with her mother, father, and sister suggests her residential transition in Hong Kong has caused a step back and delay in her familyhood trajectory. Her phrase “we don’t have a name on it” combined with the phrase “cannot bring them to Hong Kong” (Transcript 54, pp. 2–3) also implies that precariousness emerges from the reality that de-linking, re-linking, and coordinating family transitions had broken social conventions. Jenny, like many adults in split families, had expected migration to lead to a residential transition that enabled familyhood but, in reality, has been constrained by the cost of housing and socio-legality (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002).

Precariousness also arose from the intersection of employment and familyhood trajectories in everyday life. Richard connected his feelings of “pressure” with norms of parenthood and livelihood in Hong Kong, saying “I think to be successful here, I need to work hard” (Transcript 55, p. 5). However, his specific concept of *Ngaat Bik Gam* referred to the structural uncertainty that he could continue to earn and save money to contribute to his children’s development so, as he said “they could be better off” than he was. He worked 60 h a week but with no contract. His commute was long and cost him more than the amount he was able to save each month. Moreover, he projected this present precariousness forward, citing the uncertainty that his work would continue, and thereby further undermining his expectations for delivering norms of parenthood and livelihood.

Lillian also faced a multiplicitous precariousness, arising both from the intersection of her familyhood and employment trajectory in Hong Kong and from the relative speed of her transition experience in comparison with that of her husband’s. Feeling a sense of drift, her precariousness is deepened by the breaking of her biographical expectation that spatial mobility is a life course event that can secure opportunity and leverage social mobility from spatial mobility. Furthermore, the connections between drift and precariousness also intersect with her familyhood trajectory. That is, she spoke not only of co-location with her spouse but also with children they planned to raise. Like Richard, the unfolding nature of life course trajectories ensured that precariousness was played forward, in Lillian’s case as uncertainty about livelihood in Hong Kong for this shared future and, should another life course migration event be undertaken, further uncertainty in making a transition back in Australia. She also encountered unexpected and disruptive gendered social relations as a “trailing spouse” who had fallen behind her husband’s own career growth in Hong Kong (McCollum, 1990).

We also saw how the residential transition in Hong Kong carried expectations of greater independence and autonomy and, as such, intersected with trajectories of familyhood, social fields, and employment. Carman had left Taiwan to be independent by de-linking her life from her parents. While her parents had disapproved of her choices in Taiwan, she now sought to “receive their recognition” by building her own autonomy and “bring glory to her parents” (Transcript 60, p. 4). She told us she was already working and able to remit \$1,000 Hong

Kong Dollars (approximately US\$125) to her parents each month. Yet, her expectations for making friends were frustrated. She worked long hours, felt isolated, and said “I don’t really have friends here... I don’t have a personal life” (Transcript 60, p. 5). When we asked if she felt secure in Hong Kong, she retorted: “No! Living in Hong Kong is like ... living for survival. It’s not really “life”” (Transcript 60, p. 7).

Ben and Lara both told us that, as parents, their familyhood trajectory imagined greater autonomy for their daughter. However, the social and spatial relations of their linked life in Hong Kong were unexpected and did not offer this autonomy. They felt, like Polly, caged. Ben’s need to work informally meant he tried to be invisible in the community. His wife, too, felt like she was under public surveillance. We witnessed this when she accepted our invitation for an interview at a nearby *Cha Chaan Teng* cafe, located about 15-min walk away from her room in the *Tong Lau*. During the walk from her flat to the cafe, her young daughter appeared very excited about the outside environment of To Kwa Wan. She pointed everywhere at the high rises, buildings, stores, and traffic. It seemed that she rarely went out. When we asked Lara about, this later she confirmed they mostly stayed in the room because of fear of being arrested for living in a subdivided unit that had been illegally created by the *Tong Lau* owner. Here, multiplicitous precariousness arises through intersections between deportability, social isolation, and the disruption of synchronisations between familyhood trajectory and residential transition.

## 6 | BELONGING AND PRECARIOUSNESS

This section explores how precariousness is reproduced by trajectories of belonging. Our respondents talked freely and at some length about belonging, often in response to our prompt about what “home” meant for them. Their responses revealed clear but diverse ideas about expectations of the social, spatial, and temporal aspects of belonging (see Guarnizo, 1997). They differentiated two types of social relations, one referring to familyhood and another referring to rights and nationality. Spatial relations of belonging referenced a physical and territorial basis, a networked and transnational/cross-border modality and a de-territorialised modality. Temporal relations included the imminence of obtaining a certain sense of belonging, the structure of the pathway to belonging, namely, the ordered progression of belonging, and the expected permanence/temporariness of belonging.

When we asked Wendy, a domestic worker from Indonesia, if she felt Hong Kong was her home, she replied affirmatively. She then quickly clarified that “I *make* home in Indonesia [emphasis added]” (Transcript 63, p. 3). Indonesia, she told us, was her “home home” (Transcript 63, p. 3). Such graduated belonging was common among our respondents and drew our attention to how the underlying social, spatial, and temporal relations of belonging are associated with subjectivity. For Wendy, belonging means (living with) family. Since being in Hong Kong, she had been meeting this social expectation of familyhood by remitting three quarters of her salary and keeping daily contact with her daughter. Her spatial expectation of belonging means co-presence with her family in Indonesia, her home home. Her

expectation of temporal imminence, of being confident of returning to Indonesia once her work in Hong Kong is complete, had thus far not been undermined (but see Constable, 1999); that is, for now, encounters with insecurity in her daily life were deflected through graduated belonging involving feeling at home in Hong Kong while pursuing a trajectory of home home in Indonesia. As a sojourner, Wendy's example raises questions about how she has purposefully aligned the cumulative causation of being embedded in transnational networks, paradoxically enabled by her limited legal status in Hong Kong, with her own aspiration and subjectivity.

Mary, one of the domestic workers who reported a loss of dignity since coming to Hong Kong, sought to re-claim this dignity through her trajectory of belonging. Like Wendy, she expected to return to live with her family at a later date and continued to remit and support them emotionally. When we asked about her education in the Philippines, she volunteered a rich account of why she had quit college after her first year, as she was expected to work to pay for her family's debt, and this obligation eventually led her to Hong Kong and to remit. This biography conveyed sacrifice, authority, pride, and confidence in the social, spatial, and temporal relations supporting her sojourning in Hong Kong and imminent return and co-presence. She exclaimed, "My family has a financial problem. *I am the one* who earns money to help them [emphasis added]" (Transcript 64, p. 2). Her pride ("I am the one"), set against her living conditions described above, calls to mind Buhler's (2014) research on home making in South Africa.

We also found that precariousness among so-called settler migrants was influenced by cumulative understandings of the social, spatial, and temporal aspects of belonging. However, rather than following geometric and linear pathways to assimilation and settlement, respondents offset different idealised relations as they coordinated belonging with other life course trajectories, including familyhood and employment. In the case of Jim, this seemed to mitigate his precariousness. Jim is from mainland China, holds a one-way permit, lives with his wife, son, and father-in-law in a 100-ft<sup>2</sup> room, and is unemployed. He affirms subjectivity through a clear sense of belonging that prioritises living with family. Thus, he came to Hong Kong, even though he had no paid work, and reversed traditional husband-wife roles in order to meet his expectation of co-presence. He makes sense of his non-traditional role by seeing it biographically as a temporary means to an end of familyhood co-presence. But this "offsetting" strategy is embedded in and reproduces his cross-border spatial relations, as he continues to link his life with his parents in mainland China from whom he receives reverse remittances. To further embed this relationship, he visits them frequently, practising a form of circulation migration that illustrates "permanence through temporariness" (Tsuda, 1999, p. 711). His belonging trajectory affirms subjectivity in the presence of cumulative investments in his embedded long-distance social networks and enabling legal provisions, in this case, the spatial flexibility of his two-way permit.

For other respondents, their short time in Hong Kong had undermined expectations of belonging and reinforced precarity. Disruptions in linking her life with her boyfriend had subjected Japanese-born Annie to a feeling of being isolated, which was being further

intensified by biography. Belonging for Annie was rooted in nationality and territory and the resources they bring, including linguistic and social capital. She had accumulated this aspiration from reflections on her own childhood where she had repeated experiences of moving within Japan. She said she always enjoyed living in new places, feeling able to meet new friends, and had acquired some spatial and temporal expectation of belonging as "temporarily permanent." However, since coming to Hong Kong, her aspirations for building family, including raising as yet unborn children, by living together and following her biographical pursuit of temporary permanentness within a nationality based rights space had been dashed. In Hong Kong, she experiences linguistic and social barriers to building family. This makes squaring the circle of social, spatial, and temporal relations fraught, both because her biography can be no guide to the next move, and because she knows that choosing either her own national homeland or her husband's will leave one of them lacking in linguistic and social capital. Her precariousness is reproduced by how her transition in Hong Kong is transforming her belonging into a form of permanent temporariness, shot through with social and ontological uncertainty.

Our final example illustrates how constraints in pursuing trajectories of belonging reproduce precariousness. Ben expressed his expectations for belonging biographically using vivid detail from his life in Viet Nam:

Ben: You see the cops [in Vietnam], they take many things [from others]; they take the money from the people without any reasons ... even from the old people. The old people are very poor. Every day they sell small apples on their heads under the sun from early morning and [they] come back very late ... every month, they need to pay to the cops. Even me and my family, we also need to pay (Transcript 53, p. 9).

For Ben, belonging idealises the social relation of an absence of corruption and idealises non-punitive temporal relations. He abhors the constant (structural) corruption ("every month") that transcends time of day (from early morning ... [to] very late") and age ("even from the old people"). Police oppression even works through banal everyday temporalities, as he notes the exploitation inherent in "selling apples ... under the sun from early morning." He aspires to belong to a place that does not de-motivate hard work or de-couple investments in time ("every day they sell small apples") from rewards ("every month, they need to pay").

These expectations are strangers in Ben's linked and enclosed life in Hong Kong. With his short time in Hong Kong introducing new constraints, Ben sought to shift the trajectory of belonging through a simple but profound act. He always referred to his living arrangement as his "room" (Transcript 53, pp. 3–8) and never used "home" to refer to this living situation or to life in Hong Kong. By refusing existing labels and having "the final word" on the taken-for-granted topic of belonging, he attempts what Nielsen (2008, p. 273) calls "an act of citizenship." But in seeking to affirm subjectivity by presenting an ambiguous concept of belonging based on a spatial relation of



de-territorialisation, he opens himself up to not having what his wife called “the most important thing for migrants ... an approved nationality” (Transcript 21, p. 8). Just before the conclusion of our research project, we were told that Ben had been picked up in a police raid. He was deported within days. His wife and daughter were deported shortly thereafter.

## 7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our paper has deepened understanding of connections between migration and precarity by illustrating how the linked lives of newcomer migrants mutually constitute multiplicitous precarities. Encountered in the specific domains of housing, employment, social life, and socio-legality, newly arrived migrants experienced precariousness as a generalised feeling of pressure and disrupted and de-stabilising spacetimes. Transitioning to life in Hong Kong, precariousness arose as the expectations of linked lives were undermined by social, spatial, and temporal relations arising from intersections between trajectories of familyhood, work, and belonging. We also found evidence that trajectories of belonging variously deflected and reproduced precarity.

The specifics of our research design contextualise these findings. Respondents were preselected on the basis of legal status, and our analysis did not cover the experiences of precarity of other groups of migrants, including professional/skilled migrants, student migrants, returnees, retirees, and so forth. The cross-sectional design did not allow consideration of how subjectivity or biography changes through time. However, these specifics do not undermine the general argument that precariousness is connected to migration through linked lives, and we close by considering the theoretical and policy implications of this conceptualisation.

The results extend accounts of the diverse pathways to and multiplicitous nature of precariousness among migrants. This includes the significance of social and cultural dimensions, including familyhood and belonging, in addition to work and social legality. Tracing how precariousness and linked lives constitute one another further suggests that precariousness is “the norm – or an aspect of what we have been calling the common – and not the exception” (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008, p. 68). It shifts attention away from a “paradigmatic precarious subject” (Lewis et al., 2015, p. 584) and onto precariousness as an existing and consequential aspect of the unfolding social life of migrants. This unsettles the category of “migrant precarity,” which privileges the narrow epistemology of migration as event or time-limited exposure and which skews policy towards managing the migration event or exposure.

Indeed, the findings carry implications for social policy that involves migration. These implications concern both the focus of policy and, more widely, the process of policy. In conceptual terms, our findings point to precarities and insecurities among migrants that span material (including exploitative housing and work conditions), symbolic (including discrimination), and affective (including a lack dignity) experiences. Often articulated as pressured spacetimes, we argue this multiplicitous precariousness is associated with disruptions in the

social, spatial, and temporal relations of daily life. It therefore follows that policy looking to reduce insecurity and precariousness among migrants should focus on minimising these disruptions.

Crucially, the biographical embeddedness of precariousness suggests migrants, and not detached analysts or policymakers, are at least equally positioned in guiding how such policy might be developed. Indeed, our own findings have been co-produced with the input of the steering group, which included a newcomer migrant. In discussing potential policy interventions, we therefore draw on the precepts of participatory action research. In Hong Kong, we saw how respondents deflected precariousness in situations where they had access to, and co-created, resourceful spacetimes. For example, the Initiative Programme of Pop Leung Kuk Madam Chan Wai Chow Memorial School (in To Kwa Wan) provides a 6-month full-time education for 400 children of newly arrived migrants in the period before they enrol in local “mainstream” schools. With an embedded social worker, the programme also includes migrant parents. By supporting children with language and pedagogic strategies, and their parents with material and emotional resources, this holistic programme addresses the multiplicitous and intersectional nature of precariousness across familyhood, work, and housing. Conversely, we believe interventions in enabling resourceful spacetimes can address those situations where we witnessed more pressured spacetimes. For example, a network of locally based and migrant-enabled vocational training centres could teach basic Cantonese conversation, menu reading, skills in establishing businesses, and exposure to Hong Kong working culture to empower and network migrants; facilitate transnational relationships necessary for familyhood; build mutual communication and understanding with local residents; and restore autonomy and dignity. More rigorous enforcement of legal protections (for example, concerning landlord–tenant rights, labour rights, and health care rights) would immediately improve material conditions and restore the integrity of the legal system in migrants' minds.

While these focused interventions are specific to Hong Kong, the broader point about a more participatory process resonates with international thinking on the significance of holistic and long-term measures to counter precarity, including among migrants. For example, the United Nations New Urban Agenda emphasises respects for human rights, reducing risk, increasing equity (gender and age) and addressing worsening urban inequalities as ways to build resilience and lend dignity (United Nations, 2016). As Cirolia et al. (2016, p. 17) note, such social policy should consider “a complex set of interlinking imperatives that drastically depart from the modernist obsessions with order and legibility and embrace a more iterative, flexible, and holistic development process.”

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is partly funded by the Hong Kong Research Grant Council, grant award number 12646816. We thank members of our research team for their contributions to this project: Lance Thomas, Grace Yeung, Kelvin Ho, Tian Law, and Suresh Neupane. The authors alone are responsible for the contents and any errors within. We

gratefully acknowledge our respondents for their time, insights, and trust. We appreciate the highly generative comments from the reviewers and editor on a previous draft.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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**How to cite this article:** Bailey AJ, Ng RWY, Hankins K, De Beer S. Migration, precariousness, and the linked lives of newcomers in Hong Kong. *Popul Space Place*. 2021;27:e2400. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2400>