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‘Working While Feeling Awful Is Normal’: One Roma’s Experience of Presenteeism

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Abstract

This article presents an account of a young Roma man’s lived experience of working in the agricultural sector while sick, and shines a spotlight on the impact of precarious work, low pay and eligibility, and access to sick pay, with particular emphasis on Roma, and how these factors interconnect to foster presenteeism. The repercussions of presenteeism, relayed through Piotr’s personal narrative and reflections about his work, family role, ambition and daily survival, enrich public sociology about this under explored area of migrant Roma’s working life.

Keywords

in-work poverty, low pay, precariousness, presenteeism, Roma, sick pay, unskilled work

Introduction

Attending work when ill, known as presenteeism, is a global phenomenon (Lohaus and Habermann, 2019), and is increasing in the UK (Reuter et al., 2019). Identified as a growing health issue, between 50–70% of workers engage in presenteeism at least once a year (Kinman, 2019). Driven by financial pressures and job insecurity (Bierla et al., 2013), presenteeism increases during economic downturns as people cling to their jobs, and is more prevalent in workers on low pay with little or no access to sick pay during

*Due to fear of further discrimination and increased problems at work, Piotr is a pseudonym.

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illness (Hannan et al., 2016). Links between migration, precarity and presenteeism are stark. The restrictions and enforcements of the migration process increase precarity (Anderson, 2010; Knox, 2010), indeed Castel (2000) asserts that precarity has always been the norm for groups such as Roma. The link between presenteeism and precarious work has been clarified by the pandemic where workers in low paid precarious roles are more likely to practise presenteeism (SAGE, 2020).

During the pandemic, migrant workers have performed key work within sectors like health, social care and agriculture (Fasani and Mazza, 2020), with insufficient financial and social protection. Covid-19 safeguarding raises their risks for presenteeism, and contracting and spreading the virus, leading to what the ILO called a 'crisis within a crisis' (ILO, 2020).

So what underpins an individual's circumstances and working conditions to produce presenteeism? While most employees with employment contracts are guaranteed statutory sick pay, the system excludes many people (Bijetri et al., 2019). In the UK (which is not atypical), this includes two million part-time workers below the earnings threshold and the lowest-paid who earn less than £118 a week, over a million gig economy workers who are not technically employees, a million zero-hour contract workers and five million self-employed (Kuhn, 2016). This suggests that the poorest members of the labour market might be more susceptible to presenteeism.

Migrants who work for agencies often do not have an employment contract, and are at the mercy of intermediaries who are sometimes unscrupulous in their recruitment practices (Dwyer, 2019). Faced with insecure low paid work, and no access to sickness benefits if they fall ill, some engage in presenteeism, as they are left with no alternative means of survival (Navarro et al., 2018), leading to a pattern of recurrent In Work Poverty (IWP), identified by Shildrick et al. (2012) as an endless 'low-pay, no-pay' cycle of job insecurity. The UK government could assist precarious workers by tightening up on ambiguous employment status (Nye, 2019), and provide greater economic security via a new social contract (Lockey and Wallace-Stephens, 2020). Yet with little formal bargaining power or security, nonetheless we see evidence in Piotr's story of what Martin (2003: 20) calls 'organised striving' for a better future (for instance, by improving his English, his driving, and broadening his work experience). Insights into Guarnizo's (1997: 311) 'dualistic dispositions' were also apparent, highlighting how responses can be calculated and not merely a conscious acceptance of rules (for instance, reducing the fear of Covid by agreeing not to talk about risk). These informal mechanisms gain impact through migrant workers' formation of strong social bonds (Holgate, 2005).

Alberti et al. (2018) assert that the hardest to reach migrant groups are particularly subject to labour market precarisation, leading to employment in precarious low paid jobs in agriculture, manufacturing, hospitality, care and construction (Ahmad et al., 2018). Some are labelled 3D jobs, 'dirty, dangerous and demanding' (Ahonen, 2019), characterised by working conditions which adversely affect workers' health and wellbeing (Mucci et al., 2020). Migrant workers in agriculture typically experience poor working conditions in jobs that are physically hard, seasonal, low-paid and precarious, with few benefits like sick pay (Amnesty International, 2014), made worse by employment arrangements that fall outside the Standard Employment Relationship (SER) that guarantees minimum standards of protection (Consterdine and Samuk, 2018). Just one-fifth of the UK's agricultural workforce are employees on permanent contracts compared with two-thirds for the European Union

(Williams and Horodnic, 2018). There are a multiplicity of reasons for the over-representation of migrant workers in the agriculture sector. Firstly, the sector may hold appeal for migrant and Roma workers as it can allow them to self-sustain, evade the government radar and perceived punitive social welfare and migration policies (Nagy, 2018). Additionally, the high attrition level of 1.3 million over the last decade (Natale et al., 2019) and low attraction rates of nationals (O'Carroll, 2020) coupled with reduced margins driven down by supplier pressures and the falling pound, have increased the attractiveness of Roma and migrant workers to farmers (Scott, 2013). They accept agricultural work available alongside the pay, conditions, seasonality and precarious nature of such employment.

Farmers often favour migrant workers due to their low labour turnover and absenteeism, strong work ethic and willingness to work long hours (Klocker et al., 2020). To maintain this competitive advantage over nationals, migrants may feel pressured into presenteeism; in order to maximise their short term window for earning they may eschew taking time off work with unrecompensed ill health absence and the missing safety net of sick pay, further fostering presenteeism, driven by precarity (Galon et al., 2014; Karanika-Murray and Biron, 2020).

What follows is the voice of an individual experiencing poor health, low pay, IWP, no access to sick benefits and working in the highly insecure agriculture sector, made even more challenging by his ethnic Roma identity that is subject to widespread discrimination (Matache, 2017; Matras, 2015). In spite of being the largest ethnic minority group in Europe, Roma experience high levels of poverty and ill health, influenced by their centuries-old stigmatised identity (Goffman, 1963) that continues as a socially accepted and entrenched stigmatisation of Roma across Europe, rendering them the most marginalised and discriminated ethnic minority (Sigona and Vermeersch, 2012). Further, Roma face heightened discrimination through an association with criminality (Kóczé, 2018), increasing their over-representation in precarious low paid work. Exclusion from mainstream employment perpetuates isolation of Roma, with evidence that they often tolerate labour abuses in low paid precarious employment (Triandafyllidou and Bartolini, 2020).

Introducing Piotr

Piotr is 32 years old and lives with his partner, 12 year old daughter and 8 year old son in the same street as his partner's parents in a Lancashire town. Piotr first came to the UK with his parents in 2004, from Jarovnice, Slovakia. In 2010 Piotr moved to Barcelona to work with his cousins in a family recycling business. His partner and children moved to Spain with him, but a combination of work drying up and his partner's loneliness at being separated from her parents found them returning to the UK in 2014 to join her family in rural Lancashire where they were confident that picking work was available all year. While this means Piotr may always earn, it is not ideal as he suffers from severe asthma all year and pollen allergies in the summer. In spite of his poor health he works as many hours as he can get, more in the summer than in the winter. However, because Piotr has no contract, he receives no sick pay and therefore usually attends work when he is ill, exhibiting presenteeism.

When Piotr is not working, he uses much of his time at home to rest and recover and is not much help with his partner or children. Unsurprisingly this situation creates work-family

tensions, caused largely by presenteeism (Miraglia and Johns, 2016), and leads to a poorer quality of life for the whole family (Yamashita and Arakida, 2006). The impact of precarious work spills over into family life, manifesting in poorer physical and mental health for the whole family, and longer term problems arising out of uncertainty about the future and effects on the children's education (Benavides et al., 2000; Bohle et al., 2004). Piotr is experiencing deep poverty and feels like he has little choice as he struggles to feed his family.

We first met Piotr in 2018 on a public footpath that snakes through vegetable growing fields in south-west Lancashire known as 'Lancashire's Salad Bowl', where one of the authors walks regularly with her dog. Piotr was a friendly and chatty regular of the picking gang and had the best English in the group. Since the group sometimes had dogs, interactions developed over time. Piotr's ill health was evident from the outset, manifest in a continuous cough, but his good humour shone. One of the author's earlier studies and personal experience of presenteeism prompted them to strive to get his story heard, particularly as his cheerful disposition belied his account. As a co-author, Piotr has been involved at different stages during the discussion and writing of this article, enabling his lived experience of low paid work, in work poverty, ill health and presenteeism to be more deeply understood. While we bumped into Piotr fairly regularly as our routines coincided, in depth interviews with him took place on three occasions: June 2019, January 2020 and April 2020.

Piotr's powerful account reveals the multifaceted drivers that may trigger presenteeism. Like thousands of others, he faces severe financial hardship with health and wellbeing implications (Tinson et al., 2016). Unsurprisingly, presenteeism grinds down the sick worker, making symptoms worse and increases the chance of future health problems (Skagen and Collins, 2016).

We have divided Piotr's testimony into three phases. The first interview took place in summer 2019, with questions guided by Piotr's work/presenteeism and life/health situation. Next, we consulted the literature, wrote out a draft and met Piotr to ensure that it was an accurate reflection of his experience. The second interview took place in January 2020, when Piotr was recovering from a bad chest infection. He recalled tearfully how he struggled so much during this time that he worried about the impact on colleagues, evidence of the impact of presenteeism on safe working practices and its potential to endanger others (Kinman, 2019).

The third interview took place in April 2020, during the Coronavirus pandemic, where Piotr and his 'gang' were working without any social distancing or protective equipment. In this acute sense, presenteeism contributes to the spread of disease (Levin-Epstein, 2005), and the so-called 'moral hazard' of contagious presenteeism (Pichler and Ziebart, 2019: 93). Exposing the links between presenteeism, low paid precarious work and poor migrant workers offers the possibility of working towards a future to achieve improvement for workers and benefit public health (Parli, 2018).

Piotr's story June 2019

I have two jobs with one company, one veg picking and one salad packing, but it goes through an agency. I'm with the company since 2014. It's been on and off from both sides really because sometimes they lay you off, like in the winter if the ground's too solid to pick and in the summer if the weather's not good and salad doesn't shift. So I got

a removals job for a month last year and came back here after – so it's flexible. I don't have a contract or get holiday or sick pay. Before I left the UK to go to Barcelona it was much easier [accessing benefits], but after the 2008 crash, the benefits changed, it was a different country when I came back in 2014. I'm Roma so I know what hostility feels like but when I hear those words 'hostile environment' [being a migrant worker] it affects me a lot. It was a good job we had my partner's parents to help us because we had no right to benefits. So I had to get a job, anything to pay for food and bills. Thank goodness we live in a tight Roma community, where we all help each other out.

I was first in the UK from the age of 16 till I left for Barcelona and I did lots of jobs cleaning, offices, cars and factories. I liked cleaning best because it was inside. But some agencies were hard to be with. I had to earn a deposit which they took out of my wages, for any breaks, spills, cleaning liquid and equipment and dents in the big industry size things.

I was told I could earn a bonus but I soon saw it was not possible to reach the dream bonus haha. And the standards! Sometimes I worked for 12 hours a day but for me to reach the standards I needed twice the time. I'm a very good worker, and keep at it. But it was so hard. The chemicals didn't help my asthma but I never complained because they don't like complainers, told us that on day one.

I like my current job, well the job itself is hard work, dirty, back breaking at times, and the targets they set for the salads can be dangerous with all the machines working fast. But we are all together, travel in together and we chat and sing Romani songs. We do enjoy ourselves sometimes and the harder we work, the faster the time goes, but there aren't any bonuses. There's an Irish man called George Bernard Shaw who said something like the harder you work the more you live. I've lived a lot then and must be very old. When work are busy, I sometimes get overtime or I can bring a friend in who gets some work. I think pay wise they are ok. I don't know about minimum wage because there are some deductions, but I make about £1000 a month max. Sometimes I am paid late, and I don't get the overtime so I have to remind them and it takes ages. Deductions are for insurance, liability and health and safety but no one has asked why. They are willing to employ us [Roma], not everyone is, here or in Slovakia or in Barcelona. What annoys me is the waiting around. Because I can get shifts for 8 hours but if everything is picked and we are waiting to load up vans they will deduct the money we should get until the van arrives. But it's not our fault if the van is late. Picky like that they are. I tell the lads to work slower, but then we get stuck in and forget. Sometimes if there's spare veg or it's going rotten, we get to take it home, and that is good. We live in a two bed flat, so bills aren't bad but I have still got food, water, TV, phone and rent. We share a kind of pool van to work so all help with the petrol and costs. I end up in debt every month. My partner does big batch cooking, proper gypsy food like paprika stews that fills you for cheap. Often we go hungry, so the kids can have enough. I am always very tired. I think the job and the worry are bad for my health and I feel sick at the thought of losing the job as we wouldn't have a penny. Working while feeling awful is just normal, I am like a magician in tricking myself. Sometimes I have a secret cry because I think I work hard, but there is not enough money, work harder, but there still never seems enough money, is this it? Just sometimes it feels too much. My doctor tells me to get another job. Where? How? She is good though and told me about a place where I can get cheap food that the shops don't sell. So I went when my friend had the car. If I had money and a big freezer

I could have really done well there. They sold clothes too but I get ours from charity shops or the corner shops some Roma rent for a few weeks.

I would like a better job, more secure, less tough and one where I can look after my health more. I know it's getting worse, but what can I do? I would like to go to the library and use the computer so I can do an online course and see if I can get another job. I am putting time in for my future, like improving my English, my driving, my contacts, even getting work experience indoors and outdoors with farm work. In Barcelona, I worked in recycling and I'm very good at mending things. I can sew, my family tradition is leather and cobbling so I can make shoes, bags, that kind of thing. I would love to run a craft shop or stall but even renting a stall for a day is too much money and I need guarantee of money so what if people don't like it so don't buy what then? I can dream!

Piotr's story January 2020

I had a really bad chest infection in the autumn; so that I could still work and get paid; I asked the agency if I could work indoors, so until last week I was in the salad packing factory. I did ask if there was any chance of sick pay while I got right but was told that they don't do contracts and you have to be on a contract to get sick pay. I'm not on a contract so I could ask if I can have a contract but think they will tell me that there are plenty more people who will do the job, so I don't want any trouble. You hear that when anyone complains or asks a question, there's plenty more people. What was good about the salad factory? Well, it was a bit warmer but not much, they kept it like a fridge to keep the produce fresher for longer and the workers frozen! I was coughing all day, but my chest doesn't hurt as much away from the frost. It must be annoying for the workers near me, with me coughing and wiping my nose and face with rags. Some lads asked me to go outside to cough, but when they saw that I cough all the time, they stopped asking me and put headphones in. I must be a super spreader of germs and I hate that.

The work at the factory was routine, come in, take your spot, pick, wash, pack, close. Course it was cleaner but noisier than the fields. I missed my friends, there's Roma in the factory and some Romanian, but with the noise, you couldn't chat much, and the freedom of the fresh air with no boss is better. Because of my health it sort of draws boss's eyes on me so I feel I have to work twice as hard so that they know I can do it. I can't afford to lose the job, but we cover each other you know like our own private union. The worst parts for me are the travel, hours and pay, more travel and hours with less pay, not good. My chest is better, though the cough is lingering (laughs) for 32 years!

Piotr's story April 2020

I am back in the fields now, full time and working more hours than ever. There are lots of good things about now for us [Roma & migrant workers]. First, I get lots of work because the English people don't want to work with the Coronavirus, I am getting paid on time and don't have to wait, and there are no deductions for waiting around because we are too busy. We have been told about social distance and hand cleaning, but then we are packed into the car to get here, and work side by side on the field, pick it, pass it, pile it. Oh they told us to put all our clothes in the washing machine when we get home and

wash on their own (laughing). We haven't got a washing machine. We use my in-laws and no way could I use a whole wash for one set of clothes. Protective equipment, gloves and masks have been mentioned, they say we could buy our own if we want, but one guy said it might slow us down, so no one has. No one has asked anything about underlying health conditions and no word of furlough. They know about my bad health but have never offered a contract or sick pay so they won't do it now when we are busier than ever. To be honest, I don't know how you could furlough in this job because you need food every day, so we are key workers, yes key workers who bring food to your plates. It sounds very important, and of course it is but I don't feel that it's important when I open my pay packet. So all these things I hear about like furlough and shielding people like me with very bad asthma are not for the likes of us.

I do worry about Covid-19 of course I do. I would hate to give it to my family or get it and be in hospital, so I couldn't get to the fields. Who would feed the family and pay the bills? So I worry about working and catching it and then I worry about not working and not paying bills. Can't win. The only thing is it does upset me because I feel trapped. The only way me and the lads are managing at the moment is we have agreed not to talk about it, because it worries us you know. We know that we are at risk and I know that I am putting others like my family at risk. It's a very bad feeling, makes me feel no hope. First we were acting like proud men not scared of a bug but as time has gone on and we hear the news from Slovakia and the UK, it's frightening. I know some people who have gone to hospital and haven't come back so the subject is a no go area. Privately though when I'm picking, feeling so scared, has made me more sure to improve my life, do a course, try to use my sewing traditions, anything like that to get a proper job with regular hours and pay and a contract would be perfect. I would like to save up to take my kids to see their grandmother in Jarovnice but for now everything goes on living day to day. We agreed to save £10 a week as it soon builds into a little pot but then the boiler went and the landlord asked us to chip in so that went. But with the work now it's good so my hopes are to visit family and to put a real plan for a better future into operation.

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