

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Migrant subjectivities and temporal flexibility of East-Central European labour migration to the United Kingdom

Sergei Shubin<sup>1</sup>  | David McCollum<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of Geography, Swansea University, Swansea, UK

<sup>2</sup>School of Geography and Sustainable Development, University of St. Andrews, St Andrews, Scotland

**Correspondence**

Sergei Shubin, Department of Geography, Swansea University, Singleton Park, Swansea, SA2 8PP. UK.  
Email: s.v.shubin@swansea.ac.uk

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**Abstract**

This paper seeks to broaden existing understandings of migrant worker flexibility drawing on the data from the two ethnographic studies of low-wage employers and Eastern European migrants in Scotland. It focuses on the temporal aspects of flexibility production in employment discourse and temporal expectations about flexible migrant workers. Our findings reveal double movement of interruption and remaking of temporal flexibility, which challenges directional expectations about time and unsettles the assumed connectivity between flexibility's temporal elements. Uncertainty and instability of migration and employment frameworks undermine the attempts of employers and migrants to manage time, to develop continuous portfolio careers and coherent temporal horizons. Furthermore, contested temporal expectations about flexible migrant workers create fragmented and fractured “flexiworkers” that do not fit within the existing temporal frameworks of signs, routines, and rhythms. The paper suggests re-orientation of flexibility debates beyond temporal measurement, outside familiar temporal structures, and towards redefinition of flexible worker identities.

**KEYWORDS**

Eastern Europe, flexibility, labour migration, low-waged migrants, migrant worker, time, UK

## 1 | INTRODUCTION: CONTESTED TEMPORAL VOCABULARIES OF FLEXIBILITY

It is widely argued that globalised recruitment markets are becoming more and more “flexible” and migrant labour is particularly well suited in facilitating their functioning (McCollum & Findlay, 2015; Raess & Burgoon, 2015; Ruhs, 2006). However, there is little consensus with regard to which particular labour market features might be classified as “flexible,” with an added complexity that categories of “flexibility” are constructed within temporally and spatially specific vocabularies. As Pollert (1991:3) warns, this “new orthodoxy of flexibility produced enormous confusion by imposing a single typology on a diversity of social realities.” In addition to these debates,

we explore the very meaning of flexibility, the creation of a flexible subject of a migrant worker and explore expectations about production of flexibility that are used to manage and control time. The main contribution of this paper is to re-imagine the experience of migrants' lived temporal rhythms, flexibilization, and subjectivities. We focus on Eastern European migration due to its significant scale and unprecedented effects on the “flexibilisation” of the U.K. labour market, as it sought to bolster its competitiveness through an increase in part-time, temporary, casualised, and contingent work (Dickey et al., 2018). In so doing, the paper adds to the existing discussions about migrant flexibility in relation to time, specifically addressing the call for advancing employer-based research in migration (Scott, 2013).

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The figures of fluidity, uncertainty, and contingency have become an important part in the production of flexibility and migration. Bauman's (2000: viii) ideas about "liquid" modern workforce with its characteristic temporariness, spontaneity, unpredictability, and "inclination to constant change" were adopted by geographers who attributed similar flexibility traits to the recent cross-European migrations (Lulle et al., 2018). As Bauman (2000: 149) stresses, the flexible production of "free-floating" capitalism, where capital and productive relations become increasingly geographically mobile, has invoked temporal changes in the organisation of work and translated into demands for increased functional and numerical flexibility of individual workers. In this context, functional flexibility describes the use of "labour across functional boundaries" (Reilly, 2001: 28), while numerical flexibility calls for varied numerical input to the work of organisations in order to satisfy changing demands for labour. Importantly, these contemporary understandings of flexibility transform both the expectations about worker's personhood and about the temporal organisation of work, where employers no longer simply expect to extract "more time from labor or more labor from time under the clock imperative" (Castells, 1996: 437).

Most of the existing literature details flexible practices framed by conventional chronological time and units of measurement. What has received less attention, however, is consideration of lived time and temporal disruptions in the production of flexibility and how temporal rhythms, routines, and expressions of change shape recruitment practices of low-wage employers and experiences of migrant workers. By addressing this gap, our paper sheds more light on a paradoxical construction of flexibility that relies on both *production* of flexible labour markets and *disruption* of work routines under pressures for immediate change. We highlight the contradictions of "flexible" frameworks rooted in the linear framework of time (portfolio careers and stable markers defining "acceptable" progression) yet interrupted by the increasing uncertainty of the changing migration movements.

On the one hand, increasing employer calls for flexibility tends to express it in measurable terms (hours worked, timing, and tempo) linked to movement, speed, fluidity, and lightness (Gillies, 2011). As Bauman (2001) suggests, instead of fighting "flexibility," the state also now actively promotes it by valorising once feared expressions of randomness, contingency, and chaos in the organisation of work. In Bauman's (2000) description of the system of "liquid modernity" he highlights the proliferation of techniques of "speed, escape, and passivity," which allow this socio-economic system to remain flexible and fluid. In this context, time and space are framed in terms of objective, available, and useable entities, quantifiable and measurable resource that can be allocated, wasted or productively used (Cwerner, 2001; Shubin, 2015). Space in this case is reduced to distances between destinations, while time is seen as limited to rapidity, sequences, frequencies, and transitions. However, lived timespace in this interpretation of flexibility cannot be limited to measurable units or moments solely determined within quantitative frameworks. As Cwerner (2001) reminds us, migration is an uncertain and flexible process that produces temporal disruptions and disorientations impossible to measure within the temporal systems built on calculation and

exchange. Temporal encounters with the world cannot be reduced to human consciousness or seen as a commodity that one can manage at will (May & Thrift, 2001; Shubin & Collins, 2017). This broader understanding of timespace calls for redefinition of migrants' spatial and temporal relations beyond the grid of durations (number of work hours), frequencies (overtime and variability of schedule) and functions (shift-work and task variations).

On the other hand, these changing flexibility demands have particular hold on migrant worker's subjectivity, with the expectations of a relatively coherent identity characterised by a system of competencies valued in an organisational context (Shubin, 2020; Shubin et al., 2014). Worker's flexibility is described as their ability to process different products and achieve different objectives with the same facilities (Sharifi & Zhang, 1999). In this respect, flexibility is often linked to the incidences of "nonstandard" work such as temporary employment, part-time work, and solo self-employment, which have significantly increased in the recent years (Hipp et al., 2015). With the recent spread of insecurity and flexibility, migrants are particularly affected by the prevalence of precarious forms of employment, often linked to relatively low wages and poor working conditions (Drinkwater & Garapich, 2015; Moroşanu et al., 2021). This can be partially attributed to the widespread perception that migrants are much more "flexible" than nonmigrants (Rolfe, 2017b). In particular, recent migrants from East and Central Europe are often portrayed as "hyper-flexible" workers due to their precarious cyclical mobility and acceptance of variable landscapes of opportunity in the United Kingdom (Vickers et al., 2019).

## 2 | FLEXIBLE WORKERS FOR FLEXIBLE JOBS: EAST-CENTRAL EUROPEAN MIGRATION TO THE UNITED KINGDOM

### 2.1 | Structural flexibility demands

In a relatively short space of time East-Central Europe has become one of the principal source regions of migrants to the United Kingdom. Poles, who are the dominant group among these migrants, are now by far the most common non-British nationality in Britain (ONS, 2020). This is largely because, in stark contrast to other EU states (apart from Ireland and Sweden) imposing transitional employment controls after 2004, A8 citizens have had full rights to participate in the U.K. labour market. Decades of constrained mobility under communism, the presence of significant disparities in wage levels and the sudden removal of policy barriers resulted in migration from the A8 countries to the United Kingdom since 2004 being exceptional due to the sheer volume of arrivals over a relatively short space of time and the geographically dispersed pattern of immigration (Burrell, 2009).

The significant rise in EU migration since 2004 and growing flexibility in the U.K. labour market contributed to increasing availability of migrant labour and has extended already flexible employment structures, often at the expense of the migrants (McCullum & Findlay, 2015). The A8 migrants tend to have high employment rates

but concentrate in low-skilled jobs and thus have earning levels that are below not just U.K. born workers but other migrant groups too (Rienzo, 2019). Such disparity makes these migrant “flexiworkers” (Pijpers, 2010) potentially more malleable in terms of accepting a range of low-skilled jobs, which others would not consider. As a result, A8 migrants, despite being relatively well educated and well regarded by employers, are disproportionately concentrated in temporary jobs and in the low paying sectors of the economy most associated with flexible employment, as such hospitality, agriculture, manufacturing, and food processing (McCollum, 2013). The recession of 2008–2009 increased flexibility of migrants in terms of the range of jobs they were willing to undertake, acceptance of changing temporal job requirements (duration and intensity), and broadened their spatial horizons and mobility (McCollum et al., 2017).

Migration from A8 countries has been exceptional due to its scale, intensity and geographic diversity. Structurally, U.K. employers largely engaged with this cohort of migrant workers in two interrelated ways: (a) migrant workers were used due to a shortage of alternative labour sources, and (b) migrant labour was used as a more favourable option than alternative labour sources due to the perceived qualities of some migrant groups (Lucas & Mansfield, 2010; MacKenzie & Forde, 2009). Shortages of domestic labour and/or a preference for migrants has resulted in significant growth in the migrant workforces in the United Kingdom in recent decades, with the “flexibility” of this workforce being lauded as a key driver of these changes. In fact, migrant worker flexibility was one of the most important traits in the dominant employment discourse, with employers consistently identifying migrants’ “willingness or ability to increase or reduce hours to match their business needs as the only difference with native labour” (Rolfe, 2017a: 9). Worker flexibility has thus become an ever more core part of the business model of low-wage employers (McCollum & Findlay, 2015).

## 2.2 | Flexible worker subjectivities

Flexibility pressures have led to the creation of a contested subject of an “ideal worker” framed within changing temporal narratives. On the one hand, constructions of A8 migrant workers often draw on “authentic” qualities like motivation, self-discipline, positive mental attitude, and solid educational backgrounds that rely on continuity and linear chronological timeline preventing contingency and chaos (Findlay et al., 2013). Flexibility of migrants is expressed as their ability to prepare for a “steady” job in the United Kingdom with the promise of a range of realistic life projects as they escape the economic insecurity and instability in their country (McCollum & Findlay, 2015). Migrant workers are often expected to “perform” in line with the flexibility stereotypes associated with their ethnicity or region of origin (Waldinger & Lichter, 2003), such as embodying the image of an Eastern European version of the Protestant ethic of hard work and gradual, planned career progression (McDowell et al., 2007). Consequently, “migrant identity” is often essentialised, so that suitability of Eastern European workers for particular roles is

determined categorically rather than on individual merit (Lucas & Mansfield, 2010).

On the other hand, migrants are presented in employment discourse as mobile, changeable individuals, who are able to modify their “identity” quickly and without delay (Bauman, 2001). Their flexibility is framed by temporal slippages and acceptance of change during the postsocialist transition, so that migrants’ lack of commitment and preparedness to try new jobs becomes one of their most coveted values. As Shevchenko (2002:844) explains, living and working during post-socialist transitions are defined by the lack of “time for strategic planning or even any planning for the future ... all one has time for is petty everyday tactics.” Flexibility of A8 migrants is often rooted in the acceptance of uncertainty and lack of temporal consistency, as one of our respondents explained:

*“It is common for Eastern European countries, where the employer is still considered to be something close to God, for employees to be flexible [...] With unpredictable political situation in their country [...] people are afraid to plan and commit to a long-term job”* (Viktorija, recruitment agency, rural Scotland).

In this context, the migrant flexible worker is expected not only to be willing to quickly adjust her behaviour but also to accept sudden changes in organisational behaviour and develop tolerance of ambiguity. This interpretation of flexibility is contingent not on temporal continuity but rather on quick and abrupt shifts between different stages, so it invites ambivalence in choosing jobs and certain acceptance of instability and interruptions (Lulle et al., 2018).

Consequently, U.K. recruiters have consciously targeted A8 workers as they are viewed as offering a “flexibility premium” relative to other potential labour sources such as non-EU migrants, the unemployed and students (Rolfe, 2017b). U.K. employers increasingly draw on migrants’ preparedness to review their plans and projects and transform their employment roles (Iles et al., 1996). Flexibility pressures lead to ethnically ordered hiring queues whereby U.K. employers devise an implicit hierarchy of nationalities according to their perceived desirability as employees (Scott, 2012). These perceptions also shape recruitment and training practices, so that “success” of achieving employment abroad often depends on the lottery of belonging to the “right” national/ethnic group and correct fit into the flexibility stereotypes (McCollum & Findlay, 2011). Labour market intermediaries such as international recruitment agencies play a key role in shaping the flexibility discourse as their translation of employers’ demands for migrant labour defines values and meanings and determines migrants’ positions within employment landscapes (McCollum & Findlay, 2018). Given the autonomy afforded to businesses with regard to their employment and recruitment practices in the context of the free movement of labour within the EU (as opposed to the more prohibitive post-Brexit Points-Based System), we focus on employer perceptions and practices in relation to migrants’ flexibility in relation to time, drawing on the methods considered in the next section.

### 3 | METHODOLOGY

This article draws on two recent investigations into how East-Central European workers are recruited into and employed in low-paid employment in the United Kingdom. The first involved 61 in-depth interviews with users (employers) and providers (recruitment agencies) of A8 migrant labour. The interviews were carried out in 2010 across four U.K. case study sites. The research concentrated on the food production and processing and hospitality sectors, which were judged to be key parts of the labour market associated with A8 workers (McCollum, 2013). This focused approach on specific sectors was based on a statistical analysis of the Worker Registration Scheme, which existed between 2004 and 2011 and which offered insights into the sectors of the economy which were most reliant on A8 workers (ibid). The significant concentration of A8 migrant labour in these sectors is thus of interest owing to the low-skilled and often precarious nature of these jobs, meaning that migrants are exposed to underemployment, low pay, and “flexible” employment and recruitment practices. The case study sites included rural and urban areas of England and Scotland (West Sussex/Hampshire, Southampton, Angus/Fife, and Glasgow).

The labour providers ranged from individuals who ran their own recruitment businesses to large nationwide and multinational recruitment agencies. The position held by most of the interviewees was overall director of the firm or local/regional managers in the case of larger organisations. The labour users ranged from large multinational organisations to smaller employers. Most of the hospitality employers were hotel or restaurant chains, and most interviewees were general or personnel managers. The food production and processing interviews focused on farms and vegetable and meat processing companies. Most of those interviewed held the job title of operations or human resource managers within their firm.

The other study upon which this analysis was based draws on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in two urban and two rural locations across Scotland in 2014–2018, including migrant interviews, expert interviews, and ethnographic observations at key sites. It involved a total of 207 interviews with migrants from East-Central Europe, living in Glasgow (n37), Aberdeen (n27), and rural locations across North East Scotland (n143). Scotland was selected owing to the relative significance of East-Central European migration at this scale relative to the United Kingdom overall. As the most populous of the “Accession 8” countries, Poland has by far been the biggest sender of East-Central European migrants since the enlargement of the European Union in 2004. Data from the most recent census in 2011 demonstrate that Polish migrants now form 15% of all foreign-born residents living in Scotland and 8% in England. This shows the much greater relative importance of Polish immigration in shaping Scotland's migration experience (Packwood & Findlay, 2014). Most respondents were from Poland (n83), Latvia (n42), and Lithuania (n28). All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and then analysed using NVivo software. The analysis was particularly sensitive to how notions of flexibility were perceived and represented by interviewees. Pseudonyms are used in the quotations to protect respondents' anonymity.

### 4 | TEMPORAL FLEXIBILITY OF MIGRANT WORKERS

Many organisational discourses in the U.K. recruitment industry continue to focus on a linear and present-oriented vision of time to frame flexibility. First, flexibility in relation to worker's ability to change careers and life paths tends to be discursively constructed as a *gradual movement along a continuum of employment stages*, with some acceptance of the increasing number of people experiencing part-time employment in their working lives (Lewis & Lewis, 1996). Dominant discursive constructions of flexibility are linked to temporary rearrangements of work time, where career breaks are still seen as components of career continuity (Cooper & Lewis, 1999). In this context, flexibility is measured within the linear temporal framework of *chronos*, focusing on shaping sequences and successive moments in relation to behavioural patterns and socially defined roles (Collins & Shubin, 2015). Time is used as an underlying rational structure for evaluating numerical (zero hours contracts) and functional (malleability and versatility) flexibility (Yaduma et al., 2015). In material terms flexibility is thus engineered through the employer having discretion over the quantity of workers they use, the hours that these workers work, and the roles that they undertake. In the measured world of a flat temporality, worker's flexibility is framed in terms of usable units of time such as durations of particular tasks or activities or times of absences. Examples of such reasoning can be identified in the quotes below.

“You can cherry pick the people who do not have particularly high absence. [...] You're setting up the criteria on the application form and one of those is how many periods of absence have you had in the past 12 months? And if we feel it is unacceptable then you will not get an interview.” (Moira, HR manager, food processing firm, rural Scotland)

“The good thing about the boys who do the van deliveries is that we find they come back and they are quite happy to integrate into doing vegetables in the sheds and stuff as well. That is good because they are very versatile [...]. They will do anything, which is great.” (Adam, owner, food production and processing firm, rural Scotland)

Effectively, these categorisations of flexibility are constructed within the dominant economic logic of exchange, where time is a fixed element of the system of organisational resources. In the above examples, periods of inaction are ascribed not just to absences but to non-existence as they do not fit within the measurable timespace. Actual passage of time is lost; the present takes over other domains of time, so that things no longer present (past) and yet to come (future) are evaluated only in terms of their usefulness to current activities. The issues described above by Moira relating to the mass filtering out of potential recruits based on attendance figures and Adam in relation to a preference for amenability to undertake multiple tasks have long

existed within low-wage, high turnover sectors. What is arguably distinctive about the case of A8 migrant labour is that the sudden ready availability of this workforce post-2004 has allowed these practices to become much more prevalent as employers and recruiters have been able to tap into a significant pool of workers who are willing, at least in the immediate term, to tolerate them (McCollum & Findlay, 2015). Thus, A8 workers are regarded as offering exceptional flexibility not only in comparison to domestic labour but also to other sources of migrant labour, perceptions, and practices which further embed their position as flexible workers for flexible jobs (McCollum & Findlay, 2015, 434).

For many migrants, calculative orderings of flexibility contribute to experiences of timelessness and spacelessness that can discourse their self-development (Shubin, 2015). Elliott (2007), in conversation with Bauman, refers to this process as the “flexibilization” of workers, who are prepared to undertake different tasks and progress through development stages yet lose themselves in the distractions of everydayness, caught up in the temporal structures not of their own choosing. As Iles et al. (1996) suggest, the management of flexibility by employers increasingly concentrates on ensuring malleability of roles and careers linked to the worker's ability to negotiate and redefine, over time, the functions they perform. As employers from our research explained, they hire temporary migrant workers with specific expectations in mind of their future career development and adjustments:

*“Primarily we are looking for hard workers. But also they have to be flexible. [...] Once they are here we are looking for guys that can become part-time supervisors.”* (Albert, manager, food production firm, rural Scotland)

*“They would start off washing dishes and then move across and do something else or they would start off cleaning the rooms and then go on to be a floor supervisor. So you can progress their career and be ready for the next lot coming through.”* (Cecilia, HR manager, hotel, rural England)

These quotes reveal the expected linearity of employment progression (from part-time workers to part-time supervisors) linked to the expected temporal flexibility of migrant workers. Importantly, they point towards what McDowell et al. (2007) describe as “prolonged flexibility,” where workers are assumed to be flexible over the extended time period. As Standing (2013) stresses, such capacity to constantly find new jobs in a changing environment and learn new skills across the lifecourse is a key challenge for flexible workers. In this case, workers are expected to be flexible not only in adapting to the demands of different jobs but also by conforming to the temporal horizons of portfolio careers with the emphasis on lifelong learning and retraining. Despite prevalent “downshifting” to low-paid jobs (Drinkwater & Garapich, 2015), migrant workers are still expected to accept the staged chronology of transitions and dominant paths of resemblance (“normal” career trajectories) and control time of their

careers. In this case, stable employment relies paradoxically on a worker's ability to be flexible and develop capacity for rapid change, producing a contested, fractured migrant subjectivity.

Second, in the context of increasing organisational *unpredictability*, flexibility also encourages a lack of lasting commitment and new beginnings *excessive of the representational system* of measuring skills and competencies. Temporal expectations about “socially expected durations” shape employment practices of migrants, the flexibility of their work, and their social commitments (Merton, 1984). Discursive construction of individual flexibility is made to fit existing ideologies, which justify the “try-before-you buy” recruitment approach and “using workers as rent” strategies of U.K. employers in an attempt to minimise companies' pay structure and make migrant workers easily replaceable (McCollum & Findlay, 2011). As Bauman and Tester (2001) suggest, the absence of individual authenticity has become a distinctive mark of temporal flexibility. The resultant identity of the flexible worker is open to the uncertain future and needs to be negotiated and changed frequently. Despite illusions of the temporal consistency, migrant worker's identity is always flawed and incomplete (Shubin et al., 2014). Existing recruitment discourses frame flexibility as worker's capacity to accept multiple durations, complex time obligations, and simultaneous work commitments:

*“It is important to be flexible, to be someone's helper. If you are a barman, you would not just stay at the bar, you will be required to clean and do other things ... It is important to be able to do different jobs and change between them quickly.”* (James, director of recruitment company, urban England)

*“We need 20 workers today and 40 tomorrow so it varies drastically. It all depends on the volume [of crop] needing to be picked ... [It] was easier for me to make one call to an agency and say I need this for tomorrow and he has plenty of people on his books to shove to me. Whereas if I had them on my books it would be very difficult for me to say I need you today but I do not need you tomorrow.”* (Frank, manager, food processing firm, rural Scotland)

As these quotes illustrate, recruiters encourage changeable work schedules and unpredictable time obligations in the rapidly changing contexts. Effectively, migrant workers are expected to conform not to the work rules and modes of conduct with stable orientation points but to the regulations of emergent and dynamically impermanent worlds. As MacKenzie and Forde (2009) suggest, employment conditions for migrant workers often change retrospectively (after they arrive in the host country), which disconnects the past from present and undermines expectations about connectivity between different times.

Furthermore, international mobilities, labour migrations, and recruitment networks themselves are “assembled” through the interventions of different actors. In conversation with Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Collins (2018:967) argues that “the multiple temporalities of migration, the relational spatialities ... emanate from

particular “assemblages,” arrangements of bodies, things and ideas.” Different bodies (recruiters and migrants), temporal functions (durations and techniques of speed), and objects like food, cultural valorisations constitute migrant assemblages and enable temporal relations that cut across geographical boundaries (Wiertz, 2020). In this paper, we draw on the productive function of assemblage to develop new temporal configurations of flexibility and unexpected connections between mobile subjects, flows, and signs. Emergent flexibility opens existing components (such as worker's characteristics, employers' expectations, and temporal norms) to mutation and improvisation (Young, 2013).

*We had them come in and they would state that they are an electrician but that they can also hang wallpaper, do joinery work and do some plumbing work. Whereas in the UK “I am an electrician and I will not touch anything else and I want paid as an electrician.” [...] They are incredibly hard-working eager to do, especially Polish eager to do any job. (Brian, managing director, recruitment firm, urban Scotland).*

As this quote suggests, flexibility demands create agile workers, who are expected to reconfigure themselves in anticipation of changing employment demands. In this uncertain and complex environment, collective recruitment interests (expectations about “doing any job”), work norms, and pressures (being “hard working”) migrant bodies and behaviours so that they fit within the labour flexibility regimes (“eager to do any job”). These evaluations of flexibility rely on the unstable meanings attached to changeable employment practices and emergent regimes of value (what is considered “good” today is no longer so tomorrow) that cannot be reduced to calculative processes. In this context, worker's flexibility itself becomes an emergent construct determined in relation to the future yet to come, so its elusive meanings cannot be fully captured.

This section considered the ways in which temporal flexibility is constructed in the context of international labour mobilities as an orderable and measurable resource for calculation. In this case, time is expressed as an underlying rational structure for numerical (zero-hour contracts and frequencies of absences) and functional (versatility and ability to change) versions of flexibility. These meanings are contradictory as they rely on the existence of the linear system of time and measurement assuming stable markers of value while unfolding in the environments of increased uncertainty, deregulation and disorder. The next section explores how these meanings give rise to particular assumptions about the management of time and movement and reveal the importance of ruptures and continuities in this process.

## 5 | DISRUPTED PRODUCTION OF TEMPORAL FLEXIBILITY

Existing conceptions of migrant worker flexibility are based on the assumption that individuals can deliberately manage time. First, this

involves techniques supporting *instantaneity* and rapid temporal adjustments. In the liquid times of modern capitalism the speed of worker's adjustments is valued as it allows the system to remain radically disengaged and get together when required (Elliott, 2007). Instantaneous time is the metaphor for the widespread significance of exceptionally short-term and fragmented time (Shubin, 2015), where continuous time is separated into units (instants) by juxtaposition of now-points. Flexibility in this context conveys expectations about the migrant worker that anticipates the labour market and reshapes itself instantaneously (Lewis et al., 2015). As one employer in our study states:

*“They [migrant workers] could start with us and do Butlins [holiday camp] and then go on and be potting flowers. [...] You can give them one day in advance and they will be in black and whites [working in catering] and then the next day they might be filling up flower pots. And they are happy to do it - as long as it is work they will do whatever you direct them to do.” (Susan, owner, recruitment company, rural England)*

This quote reflects the demands of “fast” capitalism with extremely short-term decision-making (Sennett, 2006), where immediate change is demanded from workers to demonstrate their flexibility. Workers are not just expected to immediately react to the changing market but to proactively seek out these changes themselves and be alive to the variable context (Simons & Masschelein, 2006). The focus on instantaneity in this interpretation of flexibility is reflective of the attempts to govern what happens in every particular moment of time while reshaping, re-“assembling” migrant worker subjectivities. Flexibility emerges as a political project that transfers the risk from the state and economy to the specifically shaped individual, often an already disadvantaged migrant (Beck, 2000).

However, this approach obscures the movement of time by presenting it as a sudden shift from one instant to another and “suffused with liminality” (Cwerner, 2001, 27). With the passage of time lost, migrant workers experience timelessness and lostness in distractions of multiple and quickly changing everyday tasks (Shubin, 2015), so such pressures of instantaneous flexibility lead to “drifting” and alienation abroad (Burikova & Miller, 2010). With the immediate change demanded of flexible workers, Standing (2013, 5) cautions that “[in] the precariatized mind ... we learn to flit and are at risk of feeling normal in flitting.” This echoes with Bauman's (2000:159) warning that with instant fulfilment comes immediate exhaustion and fading of interest: satisfaction “cannot be constant unless it is also short-lived, barred from lingering” and procrastination. Another quote from a recruiter illustrates this point:

*“I got a call from a builder in Northern Ireland saying that he wanted 20 builders. We then had 8 Latvian builders arrive and they flew into Belfast airport and the deal was that the employer would meet them at the bus station at 8 in the morning, but he did not turn up. By midday I got*

*hold of the employer and said what are you going to do with these guys that are sitting in Belfast bus station? And he said I'm on holiday do not bother me.”* (Gregg, owner, recruitment firm, rural Scotland)

As this quote suggests, the satisfaction of being flexible is short-lived, with employers using flexibility to construct the world “of disposable objects, objects for one-off use; the whole world - including other human beings” (Bauman, 2000:162). When migrant workers' ability to change and make themselves available seems to take no time, it effectively denotes the absence of time as a factor of flexibility. When time is reduced to the aggregate of moments or points, it is treated as an always disappearing entity (however, close it is to zero, near-instantaneity, it does not arrive) and its movement is lost.

Second, management of flexibility involves temporal modulation and use of *different techniques of speed*. Flexibility consists in one's own capacity to escape, to disengage, and the right to decide the speed with which all that is done (Elliott, 2007). Engineering of flexibility relies on providing differential access to instantaneity or by slowing things down. As an employer from our study explains:

*“Flexibility of workforce is key, you ask them to work and they respond. Whereas with Scots in the past you go down and ask them at 2:00 in the afternoon right guys we are finishing up at 5:00 so you need to get a real push on to get this stuff out the door. And then you know it is achievable but you go down at 5:00 and some of it is still not done and the rest spills onto tomorrow. And that is not what you need. You need people to be able to respond.”* (Derek, owner, food production company, urban Scotland)

This ability to deliver a “real push” and accelerate work when required is seen as one of the key elements of flexibility. Migrant workers, who can act faster and give more effort in generating spur and momentum, are valued as flexible, but they can also be more elusive, quicker to escape, and can therefore be judged as problematic. To counteract these negative effects of flexibility, employers are actively involved in attempting to manage workers' temporal orientations through shaping actors' own choices (Miller & Rose, 2008). The politics of flexibility involves closing opportunities for reinvention of the past (work split into moments with no links to the past attached) and eliminating possibilities in the future by the creation of static “presentness.”

Flexibility in this context becomes an immanent function of the capitalist system that produces lack (of time, of choice) and emptiness disguised as antiproductivity. It introduces new procedures and combinations of flexibility routines (such as “agile management”) constrained by repressive mechanisms of naming labour migration (Mergel, 2016). Management of time (whether deliberately or matter-of-factly) in this case, described by Bourdieu (1998) as “flexploitation,” offers a more subtle way of governance than the creation of “docile bodies” (Foucault, 2000). It is described as “a mode of

domination of a new kind, based on the creation of a generalised and permanent state of insecurity aimed at forcing workers into submission, into the acceptance of exploitation” (ibid, 85). An example from our study illustrates this point:

*“We have people who are in their mid-50s. [...] So like the husband is here but he has a wife and kids in Lithuania. So he needs to work as much as he can because he has other people that rely on him. That means that they will turn up to work and they work harder because they know that as agency temps most of them are on daily contracts so basically you are in here today and you are working today but you may not be working tomorrow.”* (Isobel, manager, recruitment company, urban England)

As this quote suggests, flexploitation maintains the conditions of uncertainty (“may not be working tomorrow”). This strategy makes future projections all but impossible (except in the shortest term) to create fragmented time: the worker is caught between a before and after, suspended in the intervals of interrupted time. As a result, the worker itself becomes fragmented as it is discursively produced through a combination of discrete temporal categories (chronometric time of “how long” and chronological time of “when”), lack of choice, and instability (Peck & Theodore, 2001). As a migrant worker from a similar study reminds us “flexibility is not a good word. They call it flexibility, but they are just exploiting the situation. Those people accept it not because they are flexible, it's because they don't have a choice” (Ollus, 2016, 32).

During this process of confusion and fragmentation of working arrangements, flexibility relies on the constructions of movement and speed that produce more malleable and fluid temporal frameworks. As our respondents suggested, interrupted work patterns and shifting boundaries between work and nonwork challenge accepted temporal expectations (shifts and deadlines) and call for re-interpretation of temporal flexibility:

*“I do have plans, but often have to wait and see. The training I organise could be done in 3 weeks but the production is not always going to allow me to have requested group of people for the training. So I need to be accommodating [...] Then, there are constant changes to rules and regulations. And as far as I can see, up till recently people were not made aware of any changes within the factory. There was no paperwork to prove that training did take place. So I took time off to think what matters most - that workers have document to sign, or they understand what health and safety means. I fear that there is an accident, everything is suspended - one of them haunts me from the past. Because there is no clear guidance, people come and go, which means I can be forever running with all my paperwork, losing sense of morning shift, late shift, night shift.”* (Michal, 32, Polish, Arbroath, Angus, 2015—health and safety trainer, meat factory)

Demands of flexibility here reveal the importance of time of waiting, indecision, and interruption as meaningful in itself, not just as a prelude to reconciliation of this break into some sort of temporal coherence. It is a time of intermittence that is not forgotten or absent but important as it reveals fears, apprehensions, and ghosts of the past that suspend temporal progression. This view of flexibility relies on disrupted temporality that does not imply continuity and unity of time; it demands a pause and separation. This time of disruption is “non-unifying, is no longer content with being a passage or a bridge” (Blanchot, 1993, 109) between identifiable temporal patterns such as “part-time” or “over-work” that lend support for functional flexibility (Lulle et al., 2018).

This section illustrated the techniques of instantaneity and speed (acceleration and procrastination) that are used by the employers to engineer flexibility. Manipulations of speed assume variability of time, but they effectively hollow it out: workers develop experiences of undifferentiated lives while their skills and abilities assume *thinglike* qualities in the world of disposable objects. Management of temporal flexibility attempts to capture migrants in a diachronic structure (before/after migration), but the worker emerges in pause, a moment in-between departure and arrival, temporarily suspended. Flexibility reflects fragmented temporalities and “broken time” of adjustment (Nail, 2018, 17), transition and interrupted work routines that resist coherent narratives and reflect the indeterminable migration journeys.

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS

The paper explored changing meanings of temporal flexibility in the context of EU migration to the United Kingdom, which is linked to a broader re-evaluation of fluidity and uncertainty in the international labour flows. Drawing on the results of ethnographic studies with employers and migrant workers between 2010 and 2018, we highlighted particular constructions of migrant worker subjectivities, expectations about fluidity and movement accompanying temporal changes, and management of time in the construction of flexibility. The recent challenges of the imminent Brexit and the unexpected COVID19 epidemic inevitably affect the frameworks for analysing cross-European labour migration and illustrate the increasing importance of some of the findings of this research.

First, our study contributed to the existing conceptualisations of flexibility in migration research (Robertson, 2014; Rolfe, 2017b; Scott, 2013) by teasing out contested meanings of temporal uncertainty, discontinuity, and instability in international recruitment practices. In particular, this paper highlighted the construction of temporal flexibility based on *continuous* portfolio careers, *incessant* temporal horizons, and *gradual stage-by-stage* learning by the migrants. The paper contributed to the existing theorisations of temporal migration (Shubin & Collins, 2017; Glick Schiller, 2018) by unsettling categorisation of time as a fixed organisational resource that relies on a linear progression with stable markers of value attached to skills and competencies of migrant workers. As our data demonstrate, time management in the situations of instability is predicated on the

engineering of flexibility by temporal modulation, maintenance of temporal coherence, and mitigation of absences as antiproductivity. In this case flexibility relies on the continuous reinvention of opportunities and manipulation of temporal conditions governing migrant workers, who are expected to “normalise” the unknown risks and reconcile interruptions (Williams & Baláz, 2012). These findings speak to the broader discussions in geography, particularly in response to Brexit, where “acceptance of change, having fluid plans” (Danby & O'Reilly, 2018, 1) as well as development of “anticipatory techniques, practices and dispositions” (Anderson et al., 2020, 259) are seen as some of the strategies used by migrants and employers to maintain continuity and gain a measure of control over time.

Second, our paper also contributes to broader discussions about management of temporal flexibility and change in migration (Martin & Bergmann, 2021), which became particularly pertinent in the context of recent responses to crises such as the COVID19 epidemic or Brexit. Responses to such events act as a prompt for reconsidering the demands of temporal flexibility for continuity (Spurk & Straub, 2020), *reversing the relationship between the incessant* (continuous progression) *and the interruption* (crisis). As Blanchot (1986:21) suggests in his formulation of the “interruption of the incessant,” the incessant or the unbroken sequence of events can be seen in itself as the interruption of the break that marks the presence of a different kind of time. Our findings illustrate that such interruptions in the temporal rhythms rather than chronological progression often dominate the timing of work activities. Migrant's improvisation and changing temporal routines reflect the uncertainty of the present that cannot be fully stabilised as a “new normal.” In so doing, our analysis highlights the changing meaning of “nonstandard” work and unsettles familiar temporal structures (productive, nonwork, and overtime) problematised in existing migration research (Drinkwater & Garapich, 2015). Adding to the existing research on flexible labour migration (Ollus, 2016; Raess & Burgoon, 2015; Rienzo, 2019), our findings unsettle the meanings of key concepts supporting flexibility such as speed (adjustments to rapidly changing environments), fluidity (higher variability in job modifications), and movement (absence/presence at workplace). The interruption caused by crises such as Brexit and COVID19 opens a space of indecision where the conditions of in-betweenness and temporal flexibility arrangements can no longer be described in accepted (permanent/temporary, before/after) binary terms.

Third, our analysis contributes to the discussions on changing subjectivities in migration (Nail, 2018; Shubin et al., 2014) by highlighting the *contradictory* and *contested constructions* of a migrant worker. Our paper reveals how temporal “flexploitation,” which closes links with the past and future pathways, unsettles expectations of a relatively coherent migrant identity. Our findings add to the existing discussions on “assembled” migrations (Collins, 2018; Wiertz, 2020) by highlighting the increasing pressures of temporal flexibility supported by instrumental values and measurable functionality. Such pressures hollow out migrant identity by creating emptiness (“anti-productivity”) and develop what Blanchot (1992, 6) describes as “morcellated self.” Within the system of measurable units supporting numerical flexibility, the worker is turned into a *fragile, fragmented*



*subject*—not an “individual” but “dividual” “divided each within himself” (Deleuze, 1992, 6). As a result, temporal development of a migrant worker is disconnected from the chronological trajectory aimed at a portfolio career and coherent identity. Affected by changing flexibility demands relying on contingent employers' demands, migrant subjectivity becomes an emergent construct, always fragmented, and impossible to complete. Our paper demonstrates that under a series of unexpected crises, interruptions and demands for continuous variability in the drive for flexibility, the migrant “flexiworker” emerges as a fractured self that can not fit within expected temporal frameworks. These findings resonate with the conclusions in the literatures analysing changes in migrant identity after the Brexit vote and COVID19 outbreak. As Lulle et al. (2018) stress, Brexit unsettled the meaning of the “good and ‘valuable’ worker and challenged the valorisation of progressive career histories in constructions of flexibility. Similarly, Brexit questioned the limits of Eastern European migrants’ flexibility and their commitment to working in the United Kingdom when many of them “felt scared” and “no longer confident” about being able to react to changes (Lumsden et al., 2019, 180). In contribution to the discussions, our paper further problematised the fragmented time of interruptions that undermines directional understanding of flexibility. Our approach can be particularly useful in the analysis of changing worker’s identity during COVID19 pandemic, where the very definition of a “key worker” has been modified by the U.K. government, the importance of lower-skilled jobs reconsidered and the boundaries of flexibility redefined (Dagbelen, 2020).

Whilst Brexit undoubtedly presents ongoing trauma and uncertainties that exacerbate the precarities discussed in this paper, the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU also raises important questions about how the post-Brexit immigration regime will influence the landscapes of flexible employment. Reliance on a ready availability of migrants who accept changing demands of flexibility alongside insufficient supply of U.K.-born labour to fill recruitment needs present potential challenges for many sectors of the U.K. economy (McCullum & Findlay, 2015). Writing before the COVID19 crisis, Clarke (2016) assumed that post-Brexit incentives for high-skilled migration would limit the supply of migrant labour to low-skilled occupations in labour-intensive industries, where alternative recruitment opportunities are limited. This might have significant implications for the landscapes of employment characterised by low pay, insecure work, poor prospects, and undesirable working conditions that have thrived over the past few decades. Possible implications of a constrained supply of flexible workers include increasing pay and conditions (and thus the prices of goods and services), automation (although not always feasible, e.g., soft fruit picking), relocation overseas (not possible in all sectors, e.g., hospitality), or a switch to the provision of less labour-intensive goods and services (Ruhs & Anderson, 2010). However, changeable worker subjectivities and shifting meanings of flexibility that entangle recent crises destabilise earlier predictions and attempts to reconcile unsettling influences of time. As Lulle et al. (2018) suggest, these latest dramatic transformations change migrants' understandings of continuity and stability in the United Kingdom, as well as their expectations about “better” jobs.

Furthermore, it might be possible that, as post-Brexit and COVID19-related regulations become part of everyday lives, new orientations to flexibility develop, where career pathways are transformed and new opportunities emerge under the conditions of high unemployment and job re-orientation of the U.K.-born labour. The focus on contingencies, uncertainty, and interruptions that resist being drawn into representational systems of measuring time, skills, and competences can help to better understand how flexibility is felt, reworked, and makes a difference to migrants' lives.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the U.K. Data Archive (<https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/studies/study?id=852584>). Persistent identifier: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-852584. doi (<https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-852584>).

#### ORCID

Sergei Shubin  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5554-816X>

David McCollum  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8716-6852>

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