Learning to labor in high-technology: experiences of overwork in university internships at digital media firms in North America

Daniel Cockayne
Department of Geography and Environmental Management
University of Waterloo
200 University Avenue West
Waterloo, ON
N2l 3G1

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Abstract

Long working hours have become a normal and expected characteristic of employment in many sectors in the Global North. In this paper I examine subjective and affective experiences of overwork that define students' discussions of internships pursued as mandatary aspects of cooperative undergraduate degree programmes. I interviewed current and former students at the University of Waterloo who completed internships at digital media firms, the majority of whom experienced overwork at these firms. Internships are settings in which young people's expectations of employment begin to solidify, while digital media jobs are often considered particularly desirable - evidence of successful employment at the apex of a globalized and competitive labor market. I argue that exploring experiences of overwork shows how and why overwork has been and continues to be normalized, while radical alternatives to overwork (e.g., work refusal and anti-work politics) become hard to imagine and enact.

Introduction

In recent years there have been a number of calls for geographers to pay closer attention to the geographies of education (Martin and Brown, 2013). Geographers have examined the role of the school as a site for the production of worker and citizens subjectivities (Mitchell, 2018), gentrification (Nguyen, Cohen & Hugg, 2016), and mobilities (Waters, 2017), where schools are seen as contact zones that transform and are transformed by their broader geographical context (Collins & Coleman, 2008). Critical geographies of education pay close attention to the spatial relationships between schools, neighbourhoods, and nation, while examining relations of power, politics, and potentiality. Student internships are examples of how schools affect spatialities beyond the boundaries of the institution and point to the role of the university in broader regional economic geographies (Bramwell & Wolfe, 2008). Critical geographers of education examine internships predominantly through analyses of discourses like employability (Pilmott-Wilson & Coates, 2019). I build on this literature to examine how North American universities are key sites in the production of working subjectivities in light of a turn towards neoliberal forms of governance through attention to internship programmes.

Schools are sites in which students become workers in a neoliberal world (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Willis' (1981) classic study exemplifies how young people reify and resist class-based scripts in high school settings. Research since emphasizes that education still fulfils this function, expanding analysis to other forms of social difference beyond class, including

gender, race, and sexuality (Grant, 2017). In higher education students learn to labor through universities' focus on employability metrics, starting salaries, workplace-relevant skills, and the prevalence of degrees that incorporate mandatory employment-based internships (Allen et al., 2013). Degrees that incorporate internships go by a number of names including cooperative education (coop), sandwich degrees, work-integrated learning, experiential learning, service learning, and practicum. The specific structure of coop degrees varies by and within universities. The University of Waterloo (UW) - the site of this research - is a research-focussed institution in Ontario with a focus on STEM and coop, and has been informally dubbed Canada's entrepreneurial university. It has the fourth largest undergraduate enrolment in Canada after Toronto, British Columbia, and York Universities.

At UW a coop degree is a programme in which students, usually starting in their second years, alternate four-month study terms at the university with paid internships working for an employer, completing four or five internships with separate employers across a five-year degree. Students receive a degree that specifies that they completed a coop program. Payment varies by faculty and degree stage between minimum wage roles to CAD$59/hour, and averages for some final year students at CAD$29/hour (UW, 2019). My interviewees - many working internationally at well-known digital media firms - were earning toward the upper end of these figures. In Canada approximately 12% of undergraduates peruse coop (Statistics Canada, 2015); though this relative figure has remained stable since 2005, enrolment in coop programs has increased in absolute terms as total enrolments increase. UW is the world's largest coop program by number of students enrolled. Their coop enrolment increased from approximately 18,500 to 22,500 from 2013-2018, while general degree enrolment remained stable (UW, 2018).

In interviews with students the theme of overwork during work-placements emerged consistently. Since the 1970s, long working hours - as an expectation or demand that contradicts contracts, workplace policy, and labor law - have become a common feature of employment in North America.[1] Work and overwork in formal employment circumstances have also become increasingly romanticized, valorized, and unquestioned (Weeks, 2011). Though many have explored the extent of overwork, few have explored the subjective experience of overwork or the

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[1] Overwork is prevalent in other working contexts (e.g., in social reproduction and informal work), historical periods, and in other parts of the world too; I do not seek to make claims about working, temporal, and geographical contexts beyond those of the study site.

feeling rules that surround and define it. I explore this subjective and affective experience of overwork drawing on interviews with undergraduates undertaking internships at - among other kinds of firms - digital media companies of various sizes and stages. I argue that exploring overwork from the perspective of subjective and affective experience helps us to further understand how and why work has been and continues to be normalized. To make this case, I draw on the critical geographies of education, writing on overwork in sociology and elsewhere, and affect theory, before discussing my methodology and then presenting results.

Learning to Overwork

Critical geographies of education and internships

Critical geographies of education have contributed to writing on the neoliberalization of higher education in a number of ways. Scholars have examined higher education's marketization (Hall 2015), productions of neoliberal subjectivity (Mitchell, 2018), and focus on employability metrics (Hill et al., 2016). Cheng (2016) suggests that a neoliberal subjectivity is the dominant inflection of modern education, celebrating values like competitiveness, individualism, and responsibilization. Students are encouraged to think in terms of what they have to offer, as 'bundles of skills' to be bought, sold, and traded on international markets. This research has examined international students who seek 'cultural capital' through international education and use it to leverage lucrative employment (Van Mol, 2017). Yet, Waters and Brooks (2010) and Knight (2013) challenge this rhetoric showing that international students, though privileged, are motived not just by strategic concerns but also by the appeal of excitement and adventure.

Work placements and internships - paid and unpaid - and related discourses like employability (Brown et al., 2003) are elements of the neoliberalization of education (Davies & Bansel, 2007) and the production of student-worker subjectivity, as an 'enterprise of the self' (Foucault, 2008). Critical scholars have framed unpaid internships as the procurement of cheap or free labor by capital (Ashton, 2015), viewed by students as rites of passage necessary to enter the job market, but that students recognize as not real opportunities (Smeltzer, 2015). Holdsworth's (2017) research examines the 'cult of experience:' an accumulation of experience deemed necessary for university students in neoliberal times. Experience includes volunteering, participation in professional organizations, paid or unpaid internships, or other forms of work. Students use the cult of experience to mitigate the uncertainty of their future on the job market.

Holdsworth (2018) builds on these insights to point to the normalization of enterprise as forms of personhood and belonging. Students are held to impossible standards of 'generic distinctiveness;' they're expected to develop unique personal attributes, but since all are supposed to do this, these attributes become routine and generic. She argues that since there is a lack of attention to what is learnt through experience, pedagogic specificity is lost in a neoliberal drive toward work for work's sake.

Geographers have hardly explored coop education and the broader academic literature remains narrow in focus, reflecting the liberal and neoliberal emphasis of the programmes themselves. Researchers downplay negative findings (Rowe, 2015) and there is little research from the point of view of radical or emancipatory pedagogy (Milley, 2016). Research evaluates the success of coop programmes using employability and starting salaries as models, without emphasis on pedagogical or emancipatory significance such as educating and enabling people to be more critical and informed members of society. Critical literature contests the market-centered benefits of coop. Because coop programs require higher GPAs as conditions of entry, it's unclear whether positive outcomes are the result of programmes, or if students would 'outperform' colleagues regardless (Milley, 2016). Some researchers find that coop education does not increase full-time employment after graduation (Jackson & Collings, 2018). The absence of critical or radical literature interrogating coop and its co-production of working subjectivities has led to a narrow theorization of coop and congratulatory acceptance of its successes.

Explanatory narratives that accompany and seek to justify coop education often use Dewey's (1938) writing on experiential education to situate coop within a liberal canon of progressive pedagogy (Haddara & Skanes, 2007). Yet, Dewey's writing emphasizes the *integration* of experiential learning with curriculum design, which is absent from many coop programmes (Smith, 2012). Faculty are often not involved in student learning on placements in terms of neither their arrangement, suitability, or the kind and amount of work. As Coll et al., (2009, p. 14) note "there is no consistent mechanism by which placement coordinators, off-campus supervisors, or mentors seek to employ or develop pedagogies to foster learning and the integration of knowledge." Placements are overseen by university administrators, whose roles do not always involve communication with faculty around learning outcomes tailored toward major or degree programmes (Garraway, 2006). At UW, finding any paid placement fulfils degree

requirements, whether that placement relates to a student's major or not.[2] Critical geographies of education have much to offer to comprehensive analyses of coop education as it relates to the neoliberalization of higher education by exploring the subjective and affective realities of the 'cult of experience' in Holdsworth's (2017) phrasing - the often-unspoken demand to overwork.

Overwork in the Global North

A central premise of this paper is that universities and coop placements contribute to the formation of positive attitudes toward particular kinds of employment-based work. Work in the context of this paper refers to formal employment - I do not examine informal work or social reproduction, which as Mezzandri (2016) and many others note are globally the most common forms of work. My analysis remains focussed on the Global North, an exception to a general global rule of informality and precarity (Munck, 2013). Within this geographical context, the literature on precarity suggests that the post-WWII period (roughly 1945-1970s) in the US and Canada is also exceptional, when relative worker security (i.e. real wage growth, relatively high levels of unionization, stable working hours, a degree of job security) was a temporary circumstance defined in times prior and since by exploitation and the absence of regulation (Golden, 2008). This exception was premised on a gendered division of labor that outsourced childcare and housework to the unpaid housewife (or paid, often racialized, domestic servant) that formed the essential condition for labor's social reproduction, yet a condition that was devalued and dehumanized both socially and economically (Federici, 2004; Winders & Smith, 2019). In these geographical contexts it is recently, under the capitalist mode of production, and under the legal and institutional rubric of formalized employment, that waged (or salaried) work became an unquestionable norm associated with work. Overwork in more general terms (that includes paid or unpaid social reproduction and informal work) has been a norm across a diverse range of historical and geographical contexts.

Academics define 'overwork' in this context variously as jobs demanding more than 48 or 50 hours a week, noting that 'standard' work weeks are 40 hours long (Drago et al., 2009). Definitions of overwork usually do not include social reproduction - and some exclude women from analysis altogether - meaning that overwork remains a distinctly gendered metric. Kuhn and

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[2] The absence of integration is not the case in all geographical contexts, though I have identified it both in my specific empirical case and in the literature.

Lozano (2008) for example only examine men's employment when they report that between 1980 and 2005 the proportion of those in the US working more than 48 hours rose from 16.6% to 24.3%. Though important to include women and social reproduction in analyses - which would dramatically alter understanding of overwork - these data generally point to circumstances of increased working hours in North America. Legally, full-time work in Canada is defined as working more than 30 hours a week; in the US full-time remains undefined (though the Affordable Care Act uses the same definition as Canada), leaving definitions of full-time up to employers. While recognizing the necessarily arbitrary character of this definition, I define overwork here as working 50 hours or more a week for one's employer.

Employment in the late 20th Century became characterized by both overwork and underemployment (Bluestone & Rose, 1997), in trends concomitant with the rise in precarious employment since the 1970s in North America (Strauss, 2018). Those who find full-time employment work more than ever, while many more cannot find stable employment and so engage in informal work, find multiple part-time jobs, and work temporary or seasonal jobs (Worth, 2016). Set in the context of the broader economic restructuring, overwork and underemployment are related to the stagnation of real wages alongside rising productivity (Brenner, 2002), the rise in consumer debt (Joseph, 2014), declines in union activity and membership (Peck, 2016), the dramatic growth of both trade and foreign direct investment (Cowen, 2014), declines in rates of profits of traditional manufacture and increasing international competition and overaccumulation (Harvey, 2005). Women - given their rising participation in the labor market - are subject to similar drives toward overwork, yet are less paid and supported than men counterparts. Women are also often tacitly expected to perform unpaid and unacknowledged emotional labor in workplaces, while continuing to perform the majority of caregiving tasks at home (McDowell, 2015). Given the continued dependence on the market for social reproduction (Wood, 1999), taking on debt or working more are the only possible responses to rising property prices and living costs often exceed inflation while real wages remain stagnant.

Some identify overwork with particular sectors, for example, high-status work including investment banking, high-technology, and research and development, or link overwork to rewards such as annual raises (Gicheva, 2013). The assumption is that overwork is justifiable if highly paid and appropriately rewarded - reinforcing a fallacious notion of economy-as-

meritocracy - or if it appears to be a choice of the privileged and wealthy, which romanticizes the demands of overwork (Hochschild, 2005). These assumptions lead some to suggest that workaholism is positive if experienced (or enjoyed) as a 'genuine' individual choice, betraying an economism characterized by liberal-individualistic political philosophies, and reinforcing a false binary between free and unfree labor (Banaji, 2003) from the most privileged end of the labor market. Yet, overwork affects many other sectors of the economy - e.g., overtime is often mandated in manufacturing - so the disingenuous injunction to enjoy overwork is felt beyond only privileged, well-remunerated economic sectors. This creates a dangerous precedent and justification for a culture of overwork difficult to resist for those subject to more precarious (or who seek to change their) working conditions.

Overwork affects in digital media work

One reason for the lack of attention toward overwork is a general culture of not questioning the role of waged-work in everyday life (Weeks, 2011). Though not surprising that work is so significant in our everyday lives - there are rewards associated with work that go far beyond pure necessity - what is surprising is that the cultural value of work over other aspects of life is relatively unquestioned. This depoliticization of work corresponds closely with declines in union activity and electoral politics organized around labor rights. In states where labor parties remain prominent (e.g., the UK), their politics are notably disconnected from workers' concerns. Rather than demanding less and better work, the trend has been to demand more and harder work, valorizing the affective and cultural importance of work and its perceived rewards and moral value. This points to the affective value of work, that - in the decline of state safety nets - has become a site of membership and belonging to which we feel obligated and encouraged to happily commit our labor as the only proper path to a normal good life (Ahmed, 2010).

Many scholars have pointed to the importance of affect in understanding our modern attachment toward employment-based work, where work is a site of belonging invested with social meaning. Scholars have focussed on affective structures that include satisfaction, passion, and love (Gregg, 2008) to describe how workers are (from the point of view of capital) meant to feel about their work. These affects are overdetermined and ambivalent (Ruez & Cockayne, forthcoming), overlapping 'negative' affects like stress, anxiety, and fatigue, with positive feelings. This intermingling is designed to facilitate the encroachment of work with other aspects

of life and creates a culture of not questioning established work norms (Jarvis & Pratt, 2006). These observations have been made especially about digital media sectors, where work is meant to deliver on promises of success, status, and wealth (Marwick, 2013), but in which workers are individualized and responsibilized in work settings that are constructed for employees as supposedly casual and fun (McRobbie, 2002). At stake in these discussions is the extent to which workplace affects in these sectors create unrealistic yet romanticized working standards (Duffy, 2016), while depending on intergenerational and other privileges that others in more insecure parts of the labor market are unable to imitate.

Others have pointed to analyses of affect to suggest that confidence - in money, financial markets, or accumulation - is the affective tone of capitalism (Ngai, 2005). That confidence is unspoken lends it power; there is an unspoken agreement that capitalism *works*, even when it does not. In the workplace, confidence stands in for regulation, forming already agreed-upon silences that make the status quo hard to challenge. Geographers have built on Hochschild's (1983) writing to show how emotion is important for our understanding of work and workplaces (Ettlinger, 2004), especially in critiques of the 'rational actor' trope in neoclassical economics (Schoenberger, 1996). Cockayne (2018) points to the feeling rules present in digital media workplaces to show how affective structures exclude those who cannot feel the 'right' way at work, or refuse to perform out-of-contract emotional labor for others. These exclusions are based upon existing forms of social difference including gender and race. While reproducing firms' maleness and whiteness feeling rules are masked by the sector's rhetorical construction of itself as open, egalitarian, and meritocratic (Gill, 2014).

Digital media firms are important for a number of reasons. They are the subject of positive discourses about work, and about the relationship between STEM education and regional economic development, and are imagined as a leading edge in neoclassical economic theory. I next discuss the methods used in this study, then examine interviewees' discussions of overwork in coop placement at digital media firms.

Methodology

Data were collected between 2018 and 2019 through semi-structured interviews with 36 UW students and former students enrolled in coop undergraduate degree programmes. Student interviewees were 18-22 (I interviewed no mature students); the former student interviewees

were not older than 30. Of the 36 interviewees, 24 were men and 12 were women, roughly reflecting gender ratios in UW's Faculty of Engineering (UW, 2020), where the majority of my interviewees completed their degrees. Interviewees undertook one or more of their internships at digital media firms. Students worked in a variety of different places, including locally in Kitchener-Waterloo, in Toronto or Vancouver, and in the United States, in the San Francisco Bay Area, New York City, Seattle, and elsewhere. Firms varied greatly from small startup firms to globally recognizable digital media firms like Facebook, Google, and Microsoft.[3] For firms, the university is a pathway to cheap labor and new talent. Since many employers have competitive pathways to full-time permanent work connected to coop placements they can either keep workers on or drop them without penalty after the 4-month placement. Interviewees had worked for different firms and in different geographical locations in at least three separate placements, which gave them a basis for comparison and reflection across different experiences.

My goal is to understand workplace culture, norms, and expectations from the point of view of those who are in one sense external to these workplace settings. I am interested in the educational context that coop offers, and whether the drive to work in a particular way (and not in other ways) is learned in settings external to the workplace. I am curious about educational spaces insofar as they form part of the pedagogy of overwork. The broader context of this question is around how working norms under capitalism might be challenged (Gibson-Graham, 1996), and whether universities are either sites to situate this challenge (hooks, 1994) or in which pro-capitalist working values are cultivated (Althusser, 2014). I conducted semi-structured interviews, asking open-ended questions designed to allow freedom for interviewees to shape discussion (Longhurst, 2010). I asked students how much they worked during their coop placements, how much time they spent working in the office or at home, and asked questions around deadlines and other circumstances that affect change in their working days and weeks.

Though I am primarily interested in recruiting students who completed internships at digital media firms, most interviewees had worked at a broader range of firms too. I draw on student experiences beyond the digital media sector where relevant. Almost all interviewees (34) worked more than 50 hours per week in at least one placement, though some only for a few weeks or as they approached important deadlines. A significant proportion (18) reported

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[3] Defining 'startup' is epistemologically and methodologically complex and varies significantly by economic region (Cockayne, 2019).

consistently working more than 50 hours throughout at least one of placement and/or at unusual times like at night or over the weekend. When reporting working 30-40 hours, this was usually imposed by employers and the workplace norm in that setting. Students worked more than 50 hours per week as a combination of workplace norms and self-imposed conditions. Two interviewees reported consistently working more than 70 hours per week - termed 'extreme work' (Hewlett & Luce, 2006) - though both while working in the financial sector.

Accounting for my own positionality, I am an Assistant Professor at UW, though had no teaching or advising relationships with interviewees as none resided in my own faculty. Despite this, students may act differently in the presence of a professor than they might if interviewers are external to the university. Interviews took place in a location of the student's choosing, usually in a meeting room or on-campus coffee shop. Some students thought that I was evaluating UW's coop program, or was responsible for running the program (despite letters of invitation to the contrary), and so were at first apologetic when communicating complaints about the program. In these circumstances I explained again that I wasn't directly connected in any way with coop, and that I could guarantee their anonymity. Most were comfortable and even enthusiastic discussing their experiences to me; coop is a large part of their university experience, and many, except to peers, did not have avenues for voicing concerns about the program.

I next examine the key ways that interviewees discussed overwork. I argue that exploring overwork from the point of view of subjective experience that emphasizes the affective and emotional resonances of the workplace can help us to understand how and why overwork has been and continues to be normalized.

The affective structure of overwork

Though a large minority of interviewees reported consistently working more than 50 hours a week on at least one of their placements, nearly all reported doing this at least occasionally. I show that explanations of overwork take hold across different circumstances including (1) when it is a persistent and normalized expectation of work *in general* and (2) when it is framed as *an exceptional circumstance* that nevertheless become built into the 'normal' routine of work. Both circumstances speak to an acquiescence to overwork that interviewees situated as both an individual choice and as an imposition from without, sitting somewhere between volition and

coercion. How interviewees felt in and about the office played a major role in discussions of overwork; interviewees reported overwork in spite of instructions from employers that they should work less. Many of the conservative academic discussions around overwork pivot on if overwork is justifiable (especially when it's highly paid, fulfilling, or enjoyable) or merely exploitative. Yet, our analysis of power needs to be far more fine-grained; enjoyment and pleasure may in fact be the medium of exploitative circumstances (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983) rather than evidence to their contrary. The question then is not, are people being exploited?, but, how is overwork normalized and rendered an unquestioned characteristic of work in general?, and, who benefits from such circumstances?

Articulating this idea that overwork culture sits somewhere between volition and coercion, Richard said that staying in the office after hours "feels like your choice," but that "maybe it isn't your choice in the sense that you need to get this done." The idea that overwork *felt like* a choice, but that perhaps it was not, characterized many responses. A key assumption here is that *choosing* more work is preferable over *being forced* to work more, yet creating circumstances for workers to easily construe overwork as the *right* choice to make - an office-place affective infrastructure - is central to the procurement of absolute and relative surplus value in late capitalism (Cockayne, 2018). This pushes us too to pay close attention to the emotional and affective logics behind cultures of (over)work, in which work is a site closely connected with feelings of belonging, community, inclusion, and meaning-making (Joseph, 2002). I divide explanations for overwork into 'overwork affects' and 'overwork structures' to note that some explanations are associated with the feeling rules of the office, while others are a structural condition of how coop functions. Far from an arbitrary distinction between affect and structure, this divide is a heuristic one to organize the ideas that follow. As Williams (1977) indicates with his 'structures of feeling,' affects are structural, produced as relations between human and non-human, material and linguistic forces; throughout these sections I use the term affective structure to point to this connection.

Overwork affects
One reason that overwork felt necessary was that working long hours was something that full-timers in the office were doing. It became a general and undiscussed characteristic of the office that interviewees felt pressure to imitate. One interviewee, Steven said, "because some people

were working hard so then everyone else feels obligated to work hard." Michael reported an obligation, a felt "camaraderie, […] there like a sense of almost family and support if people are working late," evoking a sense of belonging around shared difficult circumstances. Though interviewees felt obligated to stay in the office, Richard stated, "my coworkers were also kind of suffering," which made the circumstance easier because suffering was shared, creating solidarity between workers. Another interviewee noted that he wasn't even necessarily working during these times, but that he stayed in the office precisely to procure that sense of solidarity. This suggests that overwork affects encourage people to stay in the office longer and extend the working day, even when staying does not directly translate into more work.

Overwork affects, as a structural and relational condition of the workplace, weren't experienced as direct demands, but as tacit expectations. As Steven noted, "when your lead is like, 'Hey, everyone is coming in on the weekend!' He doesn't say you should come in […] but still the obligation is there." The absence of an explicit demand (Richard described it as an "underlying cultural expectation […] underlying cultural signal" that was never discussed directly) in this case wasn't significant in the decision to join other coworkers who were putting in extra hours. Another noted that staying in the office longer was solicited by different working schedules and patterns. Coming in earlier than coworkers created feelings of awkwardness when one tried to leave: Amy said, "I would try to stay until at least one of them had left, just because that felt like the right thing to do." This felt like the right thing so as not to conspicuously leave while others were working and in order to assuage awkwardness and not to draw attention to oneself. These accounts suggest an affective structure of overwork associated with the simple presence of other workers in an office and persistent expectation of work even when interns were given explicit instructions not to come in.

Students noted feelings of emotional indebtedness to employers contributing to this affective structure of overwork (Lazzarato, 2012). As Eric noted, "the company is going out of their way to… they're taking a risk with me, so I owe it to them to work more hours," concluding, "coops *should* be working above 40 hours." Eric felt like he owed something to his employers due to his assumptions about work: he had been hired, received onboarding and training, and was being payed. This speaks to a desire to feel successful on a competitive labor market and to view capitalism as the only 'right way' to a good, better life (Berlant, 2011) and one to which employers are viewed as gatekeepers. These feelings stemmed from the idea that

employers could have given this opportunity to anyone else, so employees should feel obligated above and beyond contract. There is a troubling irony in workers feeling indebted to employers while employers instead depend on workers for the extraction of surplus value without which businesses would founder.

Linked to this was a duty to do good work, and the feeling that one could not fulfil this duty working fewer than 40 hours a week. Interviewees felt the need to prove something, often to themselves rather than to their employer. As Timothy said, "I need to stay up to prove to myself that I worked as hard as I could, so if anything goes wrong, I can't blame myself for not working hard enough." Timothy noted feelings of martyrdom linked to overwork: "I had a couple big project deadlines where I'd literally sit at the office all night and I think that I was the only one who ever did that. […] I think that's kind of like maybe wanting to just be a martyr." Amy was worried that she would be perceived negatively at work if she didn't work longer hours due to generational stereotypes: "I didn't want them to assume that […] I was lazy or young or something." Others, like Amanda, noted a high-stress environment related to a publically visible company wanting products to measure up to their standard, "everything was very high-stress, because the stakes were very high, because it's a very well-established company and they don't want to release anything bad." These pressures contributed to the affective structure of overwork perceived variously in terms of a sense of duty, necessity to sacrifice, worrying about the stigma of inexperience, and being implicated in feelings of responsibility for the reputation of the company. This speaks to the overdetermination and multiplicity of affect in which it's often not possible to separate out overlapping feelings or neatly defined causality (Sedgwick, 2007); overwork was communicated through not-directly-discussed logics.

Feeling responsible for the company's reputation and success was a common theme in interviews. Richard linked this specifically to firm size, noting, "at a smaller company, […] you have more a sense of responsibility to your work - the company feels less like this kind of monolithic being." Because at smaller firms everyone knew one another and there was more accountability, this created greater responsibility for interns. This in turn created feelings of dependency upon interns not matched by interns' expectations and created additional pressures that many did not want. Though for one respondent overwork felt like a choice, being given high levels of responsibilities at a firm did not. Gary noted, "I was actually doing most of the management for the project," which is indicative of how individualization and responibilization

are linked to high-status, presumably desirable work such a digital media work.

Here I've highlighted interviewees' discussions of the sense that they needed to work more or harder as a condition of how workplaces themselves *felt*, often in contradiction to (or the absence of) verbal instructions.

Overwork structures

Students often worked the first jobs they had ever had on coop placements, which was another factor that encouraged overwork. Interviewees felt pressure to work harder in that first placement because they wanted to, as Patrick said, "exceed expectations." Amy noted that because it was her first placement, "I was really, really nervous and wanted to make a good impression and seem like a really good intern." Others noted low confidence in themselves due to a lack of awareness about workplace expectations. The short-termism of the coop structure, which alternated every four months between work and university terms, also contributed to the desire to overwork. Some wanted to feel a sense of particular achievement during coop, working harder than they might in permanent positions to finish projects. Some felt like they had a responsibility to leave good work and documentation for whoever came into their position next, while others were hoping that placements would turn into full-time permanent roles and so worked harder hoping to receive job offers post-graduation. This short-termism meant a geographical (often international) move - between Kitchener-Waterloo and the location of their work placements - producing a form of labor flexibility that could be read as preparing students for an international labor market defined increasingly by short-term, part-time, and contract work in which student-workers learn to be spatially mobile subjects of global capital (Theodore, 2016). Related to this, many noted feelings of loneliness and isolation. Some said that it was hard to make friends outside of work, which encouraged them to spend more time in the office.

Some noted that they had concerns about job security facilitating more or harder work during coop terms. Students work at least 12 weeks to receive academic credit for the term and had concerns about being asked to leave prematurely, not getting a good reference, or not receiving return or permanent job offers. Others noted that layoffs at the firm prior to or during work terms created a negative atmosphere and increased pressure at work. Margaret said that there was a shift from a laid-back culture to one of urgency after layoffs. She connected this with a shift in attitude away from equity concerns once the bottom line of the firm was threatened:

"no one felt like they had time to think about things like that or we were trying to do a bunch of diversity initiatives and they didn't have enough money." Another said that there became a sense of uncertainty around precisely why people had been fired that created additional pressure. Rumors circulated that people were fired because they weren't working or didn't care enough. "I don't really know the details of what happened," Michael noted, "that comes off as not caring, […] they were slacking off or not really producing." Uncertainty around why colleagues were let go created additional pressure for remaining employees to work more and harder.

Another circumstance that determined amount and intensity of work were deadlines. Students who said that they worked normal hours acknowledged that this changed as they approached deadlines. Deadlines created the capacity for employers to demand more work from employees at certain times. They created the condition for supposedly exceptional circumstances when overwork became justifiable, when relaxed work environments with enforced leave times turned into environments with more stress and longer working hours. Students often discussed deadlines through the language of crunch time. "There's just like a cycle of normal, and then crunch, and then normal, and then crunch," Michael noted. In a 16-week coop term he described 4 as crunch time in which, "I do remember staying up, even Friday nights. That was bad […] everyone staying kinda late […] my worst day, I got out of bed and I went to bed," indicating that they worked all day. Steven reported far longer crunch times that spanned the duration of his coop term: "in game development the last 4 to 6 months is crunch time so there are crazy hours." Though employers often said that interns should not have to work longer hours during these times interns often felt obligated because full-time permanent workers "had to work mandatory 12-hour days twice a week and usually they'd work more." This culture of work translated over to interns irrespective of employers' suggestions otherwise.

Though this was certainly the upper band of expectations for crunch time, others noted less extreme but increased workloads around deadlines: "I worked a couple of long days," Amanda noted. In one instance an external client created the conditions for longer working days because, "they didn't send us the data until the day before the meeting was scheduled, […] my team kind of just went all hands-on deck and put in […] an eleven-hour workday." Jeffrey corroborated these details: though 12-hour days were normal, "to get something done on a deadline the next four days were 14 hours and 15 hours." Timothy too said, "I had a couple big project deadlines where I'd literally sit at the office all night." These accounts highlight that

working long hours ('crunch time') were structural conditions of offices organized around deadlines.

In addition to some of the 'negative' factors mentioned above, students noted a series of incentives that encourage working longer. Startups often offered higher pay than other placements, creating an incentive to work more. Discrepancies around payment structure facilitated this incentive; salaried payment created less of an incentive to work more than waged payment (i.e., expressed as an annual rather than hourly sum). Overtime played a role in some interviewees' willingness to work more. Though initially they were restricted from receiving overtime, as the work term went on this rule was revealed to be flexible. There were other incentive structures too, such as rewards for, Felix notes, "the person who was doing the most contributions to the company." Another incentive was paid-for catered meals or meal coupons - often considered standard perks of startup work. These were often not meant to be for interns, though they were not denied to interns if they stayed late. For these incentives there was often a discrepancy between 'official' company policy and what actually happened, in other words, interns were generally protected in a sense from working longer up to a certain threshold, but these protections were contravened if interns demonstrated a willingness and capability to work more, especially in the lead-up to deadlines.

Conclusion

Firms used a number of strategies, to encourage overwork from interns. Interviewees' feelings about overwork can be characterized as overdetermined, multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory. They reported feelings of guilt, duty, martyrdom, moral responsibility, indebtedness as well as nervousness and uncertainty, perhaps related to the absence of clearly established standards that created the conditions for exceptional circumstances in the absence of regulation (Cockayne, 2018). Subjective experience of overwork can help us to better understand how overwork becomes a pervasive norm, and why is appears to be difficult to challenge. This reinforces the importance of paying attention to the emotional and affective resonances of late capitalism and economic systems in general that resulted in this case in some coop students espousing productivist narratives to the effect that interns *should* feel indebted to and be working more than 40 hours a week for employers.

Respondents described incentives that kept them in the office for longer and cultivated

feelings of indebtedness and obligation toward employers. On-site incentives function to keep interns at work for longer, whether they were working or not. Catered meals or coupons to order in created temporal incentives to extend the working day by arriving early before breakfast and leaving late after dinner. Some noted that they stayed longer to justify the provision of these meals. Catered meals infantilize workers by discouraging them from cooking for themselves, while increasing dependency on the firm and encouraging workers to lengthen their working days. Firms present this to workers as a legitimate choice, but one that, for the rational worker who values their own high-status labor time appropriately, should not be a difficult choice for them to make. This further devalues social reproduction by encouraging workers to only spend time on productive tasks in the office rather than supposedly unproductive tasks at home, compounded by the fact that food service and custodial workers at startups are usually subcontracted and not able to participate in benefits available to full-time permanent developers and other startup workers. This perpetuates a racial, gendered, and class-based division of labor, separating (often white men's) high-status work from (often women and people of colors') service and social reproduction work in the office.

In combination with many of these 'positive' incentives, interns were in precarious positions at their firms. Deadlines and fears of being dismissed were powerful mechanisms that incited overwork, and elicited feelings of anxiety and nervousness especially in the absence of clear information about why previous employees had been laid off. Students stayed in the office because that was the existing cultural expectation in the office, often against 'official' advice about office norms. This relates to the inability for interns to contest an established status quo, an inability that, through internships, they 'learn' and practice, and that they will, presumably, take into the world of work once they graduate. This kind of learning - learning not to contest the status quo, to work in the absence of clearly established norms, to manage uncertainty - is a hallmark of the pedagogical strategy associated with coop placements at startup firms. Coop can be seen as a tacit endorsement of employers' attitudes towards labor. Some of the structural conditions of coop noted above - its short-termism and enforced flexibility in which students practice moving every four months and living without clear interpersonal or community ties - teach students to agree with the flexibility demanded by capital of a globalized labor market (Giroux, 2003). Internships function as sites in which students learn to labor in particular ways, where they learn acquiescence with received ways of working through systems of incentive and

disincentive hooked into affective structures of duty, responsibility, anxiety, and martyrdom.

My claim is not that there is no place for work-focussed aspects of undergraduate education, nor is it to protect a liberal fantasy of university education that many have critiqued as elitist, exclusionary, and Eurocentric. Many coop placements - though not the ones I examined here - are undertaken in the public sector, for NGOs, charities, foundations, and so on, and so ostensibly make a contribution to society aside from (though still, admittedly, contributing to) the accumulation and growth compulsions of the capitalist mode of production. We can recognize coop in terms of community and societal functions too, rather than contributing solely and inevitably to a market imperative. In light of rising tuition costs, diminishing student support, and the financialization of education, it's likely that liberal visions of education may be increasingly unrealistic, especially from a student perspective. Coop is appealing because it's perhaps the only way for students to support themselves (without taking on significant amounts of debt) and complete a university education in neoliberal times. For many it is simply about survival. Irrespective of these points, coop tends to ignore a politics of work and encourage a productivist, individualistic, and competitive pro-worker subjectivity.

If we could (re)imagine an emancipatory or radical focus *within* coop education, coop could draw attention to and challenge the pervasiveness of the work society, and the mandate to demand more and harder work rather than less and better work. This could include educating students about labor and employment law in places where they are most likely to work; teaching classes on the histories of labor action, unionization, and where our often taken-for-granted labor protections come from; asking students to reflect on power dynamics in workplaces; helping students to conceptualize employee-employer relationship; helping them to negotiate their position within a given workspace; and bringing to the fore questions of work refusal and work to rule. This would require a much closer integration of university teaching with coop. Helping students to conceptualize the world of work, logics of accumulation, and market society within which they are embroiled, and toward which coop programmes are likely to further orient them, could help to develop a critical pedagogical framework for this kind of higher education.

Acknowledgements

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