Resistance Exercise: Competition, Coopetition and Collectivism among Self-Employed Personal Trainers in the UK

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Abstract

This paper assesses the potential for resistance among self-employed personal trainers (SEPTs) in the UK fitness industry. The paper explains why individual expressions of resistance are problematic. Analysing data from a multiple methods study the paper presents the obstacles to collective resistance among highly individualized micro-entrepreneurs in direct competition with counterparts. The paper also explores the catalyst for collective resistance, based on the logic of coopetition.

Introduction

In 2021, the Yoga Teacher's Union formed as a branch of the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain[1]. Many of those working as yoga instructors in the UK were earning less than the living wage despite the UK yoga industry being worth £900million in 2021. Worker exploitation has been reported elsewhere in the UK fitness industry - estimated to be worth more than £3billion in 2022[2] despite the impact of the pandemic - with research pointing to a deskilling of group activity instructors (Felstead et al., 2007; Pariainen 2011; cf., Andreasson and Johansson, 2016) and low wages for fitness instructors as a consequence of loose labour market conditions (Lloyd 2008; Lloyd and Payne 2018). The work of self-employed personal trainers (SEPT) in particular is unique and has been labelled as neo-villeiny (Harvey et al., 2017) because the exploitation inherent in the relationship between the SEPT and the gym that reflects the relationship between the medieval serf or villein and landlord. The paper explores the potential for resistance among SEPTs in the UK fitness

[1] https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/feb/04/uks-first-yoga-union-fights-for-fairer-share-of-900m-a-year-industry

[2] https://www.statista.com/topics/3411/fitness-industry-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/#topicOverview (accessed June 28th 2023)

industry. As we discuss below, the potential for individual resistance to exploitation is complicated first by the reliance of the SEPT on the gym for access to expensive equipment and gym members (who represent prospective clients) and second by the ease with which the gym can exclude any SEPT. Moreover, their work has a direct impact on the health of members such that individual expressions of discontent through sabotage are unlikely because of the normative pressure not to cause harm to members. We focus instead on the potential for collective resistance by assessing attitudes towards trade union organizing and collective action.

There are three parts to the literature review that follow. In the next section we first elaborate on the work of the SEPT as an occupational group subject to a distinctive form of exploitation (***The SEPT: Neo-Villein and Exploitation***). We then consider the potential for SEPTs to resist collectively (***Collective Resistance and the Problems of Organizing SEPTs***), considering the reasons why SEPTs might be reluctant to act collectively (and to unionize) before highlighting the characteristics of the work that promote collective action. The focus of the third part of the literature review is coopetition (Ritala 2012) – the collaboration between competing firms for mutual benefit, especially between smaller firms in defence against larger firms – as an organizing logic especially for those who subscribe to the micro-entrepreneur identity (***Coopetition for Self-Employed Workers***). A discussion of the ***Data Collection Methods*** follows the literature review. Thereafter, the findings of the multiple method study are structured according to a discussion of *Constraints on* ***Individual Resistance*** that make such a response unlikely and of the ***Obstacles to Collective Resistance***. We end the findings section with an assessment of the ***Catalyst for Collective Resistance***.

The key objective of this paper is to explore attitudes among SEPTs in the UK fitness industry towards trade unions and collective action. While the data reveal some scepticism about collective action among SEPTs, they also paint a broadly positive response to trade unions and identify factors such as the efforts by gyms to assimilate SEPTs (substantively and symbolically) that promote a collective identify. We conclude by contextualizing the findings and

considering the broader implications of the study. Although this is an unique group in terms the work (as we discuss below, see also Harvey et al., 2017) of around 61,000 workers (according to Office for National Statistics data on Fitness and Wellbeing Instructors for 2022), the findings offer an insight into the attitudes towards trade union organization of the solo self-employed that is a much larger group of 4 million, and especially those among the ranks of the solo self-employed who consider themselves to be micro-entrepreneurs (see Kuhn and Maleki 2017).

Literature Review

The SEPT: Neo-Villeiny and Exploitation

The SEPT represents a unique occupational group that has been labelled as neo-villeins (Harvey *et al*., 2017) because of the distinctiveness of their relationship with the organisation that reflects key characteristics of the relationship between the medieval villein and the Lord of the land (see Burawoy 1979; Edwards 1986). It is useful to highlight three characteristics of the neo-villeiny of the SEPT that illustrate the exploitation by the gym. First, the SEPT has no guarantee of income. Second, the SEPT undertakes unpaid labour that benefits the gym *in which* rather than *for which* they operate. This labour represents a distinctive form of surplus labour in that it is unpaid and its value in the form of customer service is appropriated by the gym. Third, the SEPT pays a rent to the gym in order to access the equipment and members as mentioned above.

The distinctiveness of SEPT exploitation can be illustrated by contrast with other atypical and similar service occupations. It is not our intention nor is it possible in this paper to compare the SEPT to all service industry occupational groups that share characteristics of neo-villeiny such as logistics drivers (Author A, 2023) or digital platform workers (Wood et al., 2019). We have focused on only two occupations here for the purposes of illustration. Like service workers such as hair stylists (see Cohen, 2010a; Cohen 2010b; Lee et al., 2005), SEPTs possess skills that are uncommon, however unlike hair

stylists the SEPT's skills are not essential. Indeed, Harvey *et al*., (2017: 27) express the difference between the two groups in this way: 'the gym client was able to exercise without the paid assistance of the SEPT, whereas it is uncommon for the average customer of the hair salon to enter the premises and style their own hair'. After all, the majority of people are at a rudimentary level, at least, aware of how to exercise. Add to this the high cost of one personal training session relative to a monthly gym membership fee – in the case of the observation site in this study gym membership was £18 per calendar month and a single one-hour personal training session cost £30. Therefore, there a significant disincentive for the member to solicit the services of the SEPTs[3]. In order to operate as a personal trainer in the UK one requires a Level 3 Diploma in Fitness Instructing and Personal Training or a Level 3 Diploma in Personal Training. These qualifications may be achieved in weeks. What this also means is that the SEPT is in a weak position in the fitness industry and wields what is commonly referred to as low structural bargaining power (see Wright 2000: 962). Low barriers to entry into the occupation lead to a loose (quasi) labour market for personal trainers and so SEPTs experience a form of labour market insecurity (Standing 1997) whereby the gym management is able to easily exclude SEPTs if they choose. Ultimately, competition between SEPTs is far higher than it is for other self-employed individuals because of three factors: i) the low barriers to entry into personal training and the surfeit of SEPTs; ii) the value to the gym (in rent and unpaid labour) of having more rather than fewer SEPTs operating in the gym; and iii) the disincentive for clients to solicit the services of the SEPT.

The work of self-employed strip dancers (Cruz *et al*., 2017) maps well but imperfectly onto the neo-villeiny of the SEPT[4]. Like the SEPT, the dancer must pay rent, or "'house fees' to the club in order to secure a spot to sell their labour to customers" (Cruz *et al*., 2017: 278). They must then surrender a percentage of the fee paid by the client to the club. The strip clubs in which self-

[3] The service offered by a personal trainer has been described by American comic, Jim Gaffigan, as akin to a pyramid scheme.

[4] A critical distinction is made here between neo-villeiny as a general form of work that we compare later with dependent work and genuine self-employment, and the work of the SEPT, which is the archetype but nonetheless one specific type of neo-villeiny.

employed dancers perform also offer the means of production or physical platform where dancers are able to earn money through "private dances and one-to-one time in the 'VIP area'" (ibid). Without this physical platform self-employed strip dancers are unable to earn an income. In the same way that SEPTs are bonded to the gym, so are the strip dancers bonded to the strip club. The self-employed strip dancer has no guaranteed income, but must "market" their services to clients in order to encourage them to pay for a private dance, for example. In this way, the strip-dancer offers surplus labour to the club. Finally, one assumes that there is a significant amount of work-for-labour required involving aesthetic labour and more specifically, erotic capital (see Hakim 2010), but also emotional labour in order to solicit one's services. Nonetheless, there remains an important difference between the SEPT and the self-employed strip dancer in terms of the structural importance of each to the organisation at which they perform their labour. Strip dancers are fundamental to the operation of strip clubs, i.e., strip clubs *cannot* operate without strip dancers. Whereas SEPTs provide significant benefit to gyms, gyms *can* operate without SEPTs.

It is useful to compare these occupational groups along the dimensions discussed above (summarised in Table 1) to illustrate SEPT exploitation. The skill of the hair stylist is highly necessary to the client who attends the salon for the explicit purpose of soliciting the services of a stylist. Likewise, the patrons of a strip club do not themselves attend in order to dance but to be titillated by the dancers therein and so their skill represents a high degree of necessity. The structural importance is consequently high for both the stylist and strip dancer without whom the organization for which they operate cannot function. As for the SEPT, members of a gym can work out without the support of a personal trainer and so the structural importance of the SEPT is lower. As for barriers to entering each occupation, training is required for both the stylist and the personal trainer, while there is both a level of skill and a threshold level of aesthetic capital required to dance. Finally, there is a high degree of proximal competition between the SEPT who must compete with other SEPTs for clients among the membership base: clients who in most cases have a significant financial disincentive to solicit their services. One might argue that there is

competition between stylists operating within a salon. Nonetheless, this competition is far less intense than that which exists between the SEPT who compete for clients, many of whom have no interest in soliciting their services (unlike the hair stylist). Likewise, the strip dancer is not required to compete with counterparts, only to attract tips during their set. In sum then the SEPT exploitation is distinctive because of a unique combination of work factors.

TABLE 1 NEAR HERE

Collective Resistance and the Problems in Organizing SEPTs

While this paper considers the potential for individual level resistance to exploitation among SEPTs, there is a paucity of possibilities in this regard and many of these are prohibited by the idiosyncrasies of the work, as we discuss below. Our focus is primarily on collective resistance and the potential for trade union organizing. Much has been written about the strategies of trade unions vis-à-vis atypical workers (see Cini *et al*.,. 2022; Gumbrell-McCormick 2011; Heery *et al*., 2004; Heery 2009; Meardi *et al*., 2022) and more recently the focus has been on attitudes to collective action among the solo self-employed (Haake 2017; Jansen 2020; Mezihorak *et al*., 2022; Murgia and Pulignano, 2019; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020; Vandaele 2020). Whether such workers are receptive to trade unions will depend among other things on their perception of job quality (see Vandaele *et al*., 2019) and on the interrelated issues of their status and how they view themselves. It is well established that *genuinely* self-employed workers 'tend to internalize individualistic orientations' (Jansen 2020: 530; see also Pernicka 2006) and so we might distinguish between those who are micro-entrepreneurs and those who are dependent workers (Dean 2012; Moore and Newsome 2018; Rosioru 2014), whose self-employment is bogus (Kirk 2020) or false (Behling and Harvey 2015).

The SEPTs is a distinctive form of self-employment, different from many other forms of self-employment. For instance, there is for the SEPT a dependency upon the gym for the means of production that requires a degree of obedience to organizational rules and managerial instruction to avoid exclusion. The SEPT lacks *complete* control or autonomy over working time or

working procedures, however, the degree of obedience is very different and more onerous for a dependent worker. It is the individual SEPT who ultimately determines the tariff for their services, however, the market (for SEPTs at any one gym) constrains individual choice in this regard. As per the law of demand, a SEPT in a highly competitive context who charges more than the "going rate" as determined by colleagues for what is a standard service is unlikely to flourish unless the service is sufficiently distinctive unlikely in the context where advice is based on universal bio-mechanical theory.

Nonetheless, the SEPT is clearly not a dependent worker who relies on "substantial continuity of engagement with a single employer over many contracts" and for whom "normal activities of self-employment are limited or non-existent, such as tendering for different contracts, negotiating prices for services with clients" (Behling and Harvey 2015: 970). The gym is not a client in the way that a single organization is for the dependent worker, but the gym provides SEPTs with the "platform" from which they source clients and for the use of which platform they pay a rent. The work of the SEPT is for that reason very different to the work of digital platform freelancers. Moreover, the SEPT competes with other SEPTs of whom there are often many because of the benefits they offer including rent and surplus labour. This competition drives an individualistic orientation more common among the genuinely self-employed. Moreover, the work of SEPTs is highly individualised both in the sense of the SEPT working alone but also most commonly working with [or for] an individual client. Each independent SEPT operates with a distinctive business identity and SEPTs are at pains to market the distinctiveness of their service: differentiation is often conveyed through the aesthetic of the personal trainer, for example (see Harvey *et al*., 2014).

Our argument here is that the neo-villeiny of the SEPT is distinctive with elements that set it apart from dependent work and genuine self-employment[5] and Table 2 summarizes these differences.

[5] The SEPT is also similar to but significantly different from franchisees. Whereas rent is required of both the SEPT and the franchisee, the relationship between the franchisor and

TABLE 2 NEAR HERE

The SEPT is a type of micro-entrepreneur, defined by the European Commission as a person running an organization with fewer then 10 employees and 'an annual turnover (the amount of money taken in a particular period) or balance sheet (a statement of a company's assets and liabilities) below €2 million'[6]. Individualism and competition with other SEPTs is a core characteristic of the work. One might therefore anticipate a very different attitude towards collective action among SEPTs and those who have been forced to accept a contract for services in place of a contract of service. Of course, perceptions will vary among those who have set up their own business depending upon how they view their role vis-à-vis the client and the solo self-employed do not necessarily align themselves with either the employed or as business-people (Kapelinsky and Shoshana 2019). One might reasonably anticipate a more positive response to trade union membership among dependent workers, while the individualism of and competition between SEPTs is more likely to drive self-interest as it does for the micro-entrepreneurs among the solo self-employed (Jansen 2020).

Coopetition for Self-Employed Workers

The individualised nature of SEPT work is a barrier to collectivism, however, SEPT exploitation (i.e., the mandate for a rent by the gym and the appropriation of unpaid labour) generates a common experience of injustice around which to organise – the sine qua non for mobilisation (Kelly 1998: 27; cf. Beirne *et al*., 2019). Moreover, the SEPT evidently shares a common experience and common interests with their counterparts: that the moderation in the pursuit of one's own economic self-interest is in the interests of all – crucial for collective action (see Doellgast *et al*., 2018: 14).

franchisee is very different from the relationship between gym managers and SEPTs because the franchisor has an economic interest in the success of the franchisee (see Felstead 1991).

[6] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=LEGISSUM:n26026&isLegissum=true

The high levels of competition for scarce resources serve to fuel the competition between SEPTs, but it can also generate *coopetition*. Coopetition is a term used to describe the state of collaboration between competing firms (Ritala 2012; see also Bouncken *et al*., 2015; Czachon and Mucha-Kuś, 2014; Tidstrom 2008; Walley 2007). Indeed, coopetition has been shown to be beneficial for the performance of larger, but especially for smaller firms (Crick 2018) and has been applied to fitness instructors who collaborate despite competing with one another. Crick and Crick (2016) show how rival martial arts clubs collaborate so that students can train free at rival clubs, that resources are to a degree combined to the benefit of students at all clubs in order to allow attendance at overseas competitions (see also Jones et al., 2017). However, a more recent study by Crick and Crick (2020) sound a note of caution about coopetition between entrepreneurs who risk inviting opportunistic behaviours by their rivals while engaging in business coopetition (see also Crick 2019 and 2021).

Coopetition in its earlier iteration (instrumental coopetition) is very much dependent upon an instrumental rationale whereby competing firms cooperate if there is mutual benefit and where support received generates the obligation of reciprocity. An evolution of the concept appears to be more closely aligned with traditional forms of collective action among workers. Here it is argued that "coopetition can persist beyond financial and self-serving actions" (Mathias *et al*., 2018: 3087), wherein "reciprocity occurs within a collective and is guided by group norms rather than direct personal benefits" (ibid: 3108). Moreover, Mattias and colleagues note the way in which ideological opposition to large incumbent firms among the new entrants generates "oppositional identity that promoted cooperation within the collective" leading to "more than just one-off social exchanges but a diverse and ongoing set of cooperative interactions within a collective" (ibid: 3109).

We use the term coopetition here as a logic to underpin collectivism and to theorise a collective relationship between highly individualised workers who

are in intense and proximal competition with one another. As we explain above, the work of SEPTs is very different from the work of other freelancers and so the nature of trade union representation must also be very different. Conceptually, coopetitive representation differs markedly from the representation of other freelancers (see for example, Heery et al., 2004; Heery 2009; Nowak 2015; Rigby and O'Brien-Smith 2010; Salaman 2016; Wynn 2015) in that it emphasizes collective bargaining on issues that affect all SEPTs in a single context, e.g., rent, over servicing and focuses attention on single organizations rather than being multi-employer in its orientation. Coopetitive representation is a means by which SEPTs (or indeed any micro-entrepreneur) who are in intense and proximal competition with one another might cooperate in order to address issues of exploitation by gyms (or larger competitors) that affect them all without hampering the ambition of the individual who remains free to pursue individual business objectives. Coopetition therefore represents a logic on which to organize the most disparate and individualised of worker groups. We explore the attitudes of SEPTs to collective action and trade union organizing through a multiple method study documented below.

Data Collection Methods

The data analysed in this paper were collected as part of a multi-method study undertaken over a ten-month period from December 2017 to October 2018. Qualitative data were collected from participant observation carried out in one gym in South Wales. Around 40 hours of participant observation were conducted over a 10week period between April and October 2018. Participant observation involved observing SEPTs at the gym who were aware of the study and included multiple informal interviews conducted as conversations with the SEPTs therein (Sparkes, 2009; Van Maanen, 2011). The observation period was formally arranged via agreement with gym management and with the knowledge of the SEPTs operating therein. Whereas participant observation involves integrating into the environment by participating in the activities common therein (Aktinson and Hammersley, 1998) – in this case, engaging in exercise – the researcher also made notes regularly during observation

sessions. The observation data enable us to understand and the impact of competition in terms of the interaction between the SEPTs based in the observation site and their presence in the gym to which we refer in the findings section. Qualitative data were also collected from a small number (i.e., six[7]) of in-depth interviews. Whereas one interview was conducted in December 2017, the qualitative data collection largely took place between April and October 2018 and were used to triangulate the observational data and results from the questionnaire (see Jick 1979; see also Hussein, 2009, for a more recent review of the value in combining qualitative and quantitative research methods).

Data were also collected from a questionnaire survey sent directly to 462 personal trainers operating in 40 cities across the UK (with at least 10 personal trainers contacted in each city). The questionnaire survey included questions that dealt with a range of issues including: the SEPT's experience of work, the activities the SEPT undertakes as part of their work, and the impact of the work on the SEPT's mental and physical health. Several questions focused on attitudes towards trade unions and collective action, these are: To what extent do you agree that you would benefit from some form of independent representation, i.e., someone to negotiate your rent fees or income from the gym? To what extent do you agree that you would benefit from being a member of a trade union? To what extent do you agree that the other personal trainers at your gym would work collectively with colleagues, e.g., agree to and maintain a baseline rate for services, withdraw services if the majority agreed to do so etc.? Respondents were also asked to assess the extent to which they felt that organisations such as the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity, the Register of Exercise Professionals and the National Register of Personal Trainers do enough to represent the needs and status of personal trainers as a group according to four measures: i) publicity for the industry; ii) protecting the rights of personal trainers; iii) representing the interests of personal trainers within the industry; and iv) representing the interests of personal trainers with government. At multiple points in the survey

[7] A total of 6 interviews were conducted including two interviews with Interviewee 1 in December 2017 and again in October 2018, i.e., at the start and at the end of the study.

respondents were given the opportunity to elaborate on their answers and many respondents included comments. These qualitative data are analysed in the findings section.

Those in the sample of 462 personal trainers were contacted initially with a request to participate in the questionnaire survey and provided with the link to the online survey (hosted by onlinesurveys.ac.uk, formerly Bristol Online Surveys) in April-May 2018. A follow-up email was sent to recipients in July 2018 irrespective of whether or not they had participated. Participation in the survey was encouraged by the possibility of winning one of five vouchers ranging in value from £10 to £50. A total of 97 responses were received (i.e., 20 per cent response rate). The survey was password-protected in order to reduce the possibility that 'uninvited participants' would complete the survey thereby substantially distorting the survey results (see Sue and Ritter 2012: 78). The response rate to this survey was doubtlessly hampered by the use of what was with hindsight a problematic password. The password included both a zero "0" and a capital letter "O". Problems accessing the survey were identified during both the interviews and the participant observation with several SEPTs at the observation site complaining during conversations[8] that they had tried but failed to access the survey. This paper draws on data from 74 respondents who declared themselves as self-employed. Analysis of the quantitative data was conducted using the Online Survey software and is rudimentary for the purposes of transparency (for a justification of rudimentary statistical analysis see Murphy 2021; Tay et al., 2016). We conclude this section with an acknowledgement of the interpretative nature (see Halfpenny 1979) of analysis of qualitative data. Our approach has been to draw on multiple methods of data collection as a means of triangulating the data and reducing the impact of author bias.

Findings

[8] Conversations that took place during the observation were numerous and these are not counted as formal interviews here.

Constraints on Individual Resistance

The discussion of the possibilities for individual forms of resistance among SEPTs is brief because the primary data do not deal with this explicitly. However, this is an important consideration and the discussion in this section documents the reasons why individual level resistance is problematic. First, any effort to disrupt the operation of the gym is self-defeating if it diminishes membership and as a consequence, the SEPTs potential client base. To sow discontent among the members of the gym in the hope that members will penalize the gym by leaving leads to a reduction in the number of potential clients to whom the SEPT has access. Second, individual expressions of sabotage are also delimited by coercion. The effectiveness of coercion is contingent upon three aspects of the work, one of which is threat of exclusion where such exclusion is feared by the worker (Burawoy and Wright, 1990). SEPTs are unlikely to engage in any individual activities that might lead to their exclusion from the gym because exclusion eliminates access to the means of production, e.g., the instruments of labour and the subjects of labour or as one interviewee commented: 'If you're out [of the gym] then you're out of work' (Interviewee 2 notes, April 2018). Exclusion means that the SEPT must operate in a different gym where that SEPT is at a disadvantage to counterparts who are established there. Exclusion from a gym is also likely to result in the loss of existing clients. While clients form an emotional relationship with their trainer (see George 2008), the client as gym member also often has a very strong connection with their gym. For example, the cost of membership may be an important determinant of the member's decision to become and remain a member. The location of the gym will also be an important consideration and choice of gyms will be influenced largely by convenience. Finally, a strong community bond forms among the members of the gym where commitment to the gym is an indirect consequence of the friendship a member develops with other members. To adapt Allen and Meyer's (1990) famous contribution, clients may well develop affective commitment to their SEPT, but the power of continuance commitment to the gym as a consequence of cost, convenience and/or community is a potent source of member retention. In sum, the SEPT

cannot rely on their clients leaving the gym to follow them when and where they go.

Obstacles to Collective Resistance

We begin this section by discussing the attitudes of SEPTs towards independent representation by the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity, the Register of Exercise Professionals and the National Register of Personal Trainers. The Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (launched in 2011) has emerged as the professional body for personal trainers and operates just like other chartered institutes to maintain standards in the industry. The Register of Exercise Professionals has sought to ensure the standards in this area since 2002. The National Register of Personal Trainers was launched in 1991 and essentially provides marketing support for personal trainers providing an online database of personal trainers in the UK. None of these organisations represent the interest of SEPTs with gyms. Indeed, the Register of Exercise Professionals is funded by gyms and so it is fundamentally ill suited to represent the interests of SEPTs against those gyms. Survey participants were asked whether they felt these organizations did enough to assist SEPTs and were asked to rate the efficacy of the organizations according to a 5point series, from very much so (5) to not at all (1) on a series of criteria. The data are indicative of widespread levels of discontent with these organizations and representation insecurity (Standing 1997) (see Table 3).

TABLE 3. NEAR HERE

In the absence of organizations that effectively promote collectivism, concerns were expressed about whether and how personal trainers might work collectively. For instance, several survey participants conveyed uncertainty about the role and impact of trade unions to their work:

> Not sure how it works for self-employed. (Male, Manchester)
>
> Being self-employed I wouldn't benefit from it. (Female, Chelmsford)
>
> I am not sure how effective a union would in the gym environment (Female, Midlands)

Two comments in particular focus on concerns about the impact of collective action on independence as a business but also foreshadow the relevance of coopetitive representation:

> A union might take away the flexibility of the self-employed nature of the business. (Female, Oxfordshire)
>
> As a Freelance PT can't see how this would be of any help. (Female, Wales)

An interviewee made a similar comment stating that setting up a union affiliated to the Independent Workers of Great Britain was "not a route I'd like to see us go down… doesn't help our image" (Interviewee 1, October 2018).

Two interviewees (Interviewee 2 and Interviewee 3) suggested that there was no animosity between personal trainers at their gym, but they also felt that coordination between SEPTs on pricing would be problematic because of the incentive to undercut one another in order to attract clients. Observation at the site of study revealed what appeared to be a positive interpersonal relationship between the SEPTs, but little evidence that SEPTs operated collectively to the benefit of others by sharing clients or referral, for example. Observation was conducted on every day of the week at different times of day. Nonetheless it was rare not to see the majority of SEPTs on the gym floor on each visit irrespective of the day or time of day. Informal discussion with SEPTs operating at the observation site reveal that a 6-day week was common, although it was not uncommon for SEPTs to be on site seven days a week in order to maximize access to prospective clients.

Doubts about the extent to which counterparts would be prepared to "moderate the pursuit of their own economic self-interest" (Banting and Kymlicka 2015: 1, quoted in Doellgast *et al*., 2018: 14), were shared by Interviewee 1 who stated more emphatically that there will "always be one who'll undercut the rest" (October 2018). And while one male survey respondent based in Kent was more optimistic – "Most trainers do get along and understand that any under cutting would only make life more difficult and would have to

work harder to increase revenue" (Male, Kent) – many others shared the scepticism of the interviewees:

> They are all very independent and want to look after themselves but not really be part of a team I think. (Female, Northern England)
>
> Most PT's do so [work in collaboration] but some are known for undercutting. (Male, Birmingham)
>
> There wouldn't [be cooperation], they are all out for them selfs (sic) and we all have different programs and training options and all offer different things and have very different training we have undertaken so some think they are worth more than others. (Male, Belfast)
>
> Every self-employed trainer runs their own business and makes their own decisions. (Female, London)

Catalyst for Collective Resistance

Despite the pessimism about collective action expressed in the survey and documented above, a surprising finding from the data in the context of high levels of individualism and competition is that attitudes among respondents towards trade unions were widely positive. Table 4 reveals widespread agreement with the need for independent representation and indeed for trade union involvement:

> I generally believe Unions are a good thing. (Female, Manchester)

> A lot of gyms charge high rent or expect free work yet there is no support on securing clients, business, development and it is extremely stressful having to ensure a monthly income each month that covers the gym rent and all other expenses. I think PT is an invaluable service to provide but *a lot are not able to sustain their businesses due to the fees and lack of support/representation* [emphasis added]. (Female, Newcastle)

TABLE 4. NEAR HERE

Other respondents commented on the benefits of trade union representation, for example:

> Working in a collective can be useful. (Male, London)
>
> [Trade unions are] Always useful for advice, guidance and support. (Female, Durham)
>
> Could provide clarity on self-employed/worker status and rights. (Male, Hull)
>
> To ensure fairness and equality through the industry. (Male, Cambridge)
>
> Could be helpful during times of low income. (Female, London)
>
> More protection and help needed for fitness professionals. (Female, "overseas")
>
> People generally benefit from unionising. (Female, Swansea)

These data illustrate issues around which a trade union can organise SEPTs to act in concert while they are concurrently able to compete with one another. The comments above identify fairness in rent and SEPT rights at the gym – issues over which trade unions are well placed to negotiate. Trade unions are also well placed to orchestrate collective action in order to reduce the interference by gym management in SEPT activities thereby increasing their autonomy to act independently. Autonomy is a function of control over work (pace and scheduling) and the stress created by work (Vandaele *et al*., 2019: 24). Despite being self-employed, several respondents commented on the ways in which the gym interferes and seeks control over the SEPTs business:

> Gyms are constantly trying run and control the trainers leaving them with very little freedom to run their own business without interference… The trainers have very little option but to follow the rules of the gym, which are there for the gyms benefit and not the trainers. Quite often these

> rules go overboard and would seem unfair. The trainers need someone who can go to the gym owners to express any concerns and opinions. Instead trainers are told to like the conditions or leave. (Male, Kent)

> We're contracted to do 10-hours per week on gym floor, performing tasks solely for the club. In return, we can use the gym to run our Personal Training business. It's a very good deal, as overheads are at a minimum and the standard of facilities are very good. They also leave us alone to get on with our work, for the most part. However, it has recently been brought to my attention by an employment lawyer, that the club have been treating us as "workers" e.g. having to report for duty at regular set times and having to hit targets/KPIs etc. Despite this, we receive no holidays and are required to work our shifts 52-weeks of the year. Also, despite having to deliver tasks in a similar manner to an employee, we're not fully supported in our roles by management. (Male, Hull)

Aside from the attempts at substantive assimilation of independent work at larger gym chains documented above there is also symbolic assimilation (see for example, Felstead et al., 2007). Substantive and symbolic assimilation of the SEPT is very different from the uniformity imposed on franchisees by the franchisor (see Felstead 1991) where the interests of both parties are served by the process of standardization of product, service and/or look of the franchise. The substantive assimilation can be seen in the lack of freedom and the imposition of rules detailed above, while symbolic assimilation is achieved through the imposition of a uniform on its SEPTs. The uniform, usually a T-shirt or polo shirt, is a means of advertising the gym via the SEPT who through this attire consequently acts as a walking billboard (Zeithaml and Bitner 1996; see also Nickson et al., 2005) for the gym. Moreover, it is another means of appropriation of the SEPTs work-for-labour as an interviewee pointed out, 'Bright blue tops must be worn when working gym floor, but black tops when taking classes… we have to wear bright blue [gym name] hoodies. Consequently [i.e., a result of looking like staff] *there are lots of queries* [about

gym rather than their services] – *this can happen when I am training somebody and I get disturbed*' (Interviewee 3, April 2018).

Of course, efforts to assimilate the SEPTs have the potential for "dysfunctional" outcomes such as encouraging a common identity and a common source of discontent that is at the heart of associational power (Wright 2000). In seeking to extract further surplus value from SEPTs through assimilation the gym forges a common identity among independent workers and establishes the foundation for coopetition against the gym as a common enemy.

Conclusion

This paper assesses the potential for SEPTs to resist exploitation by gyms in the UK fitness industry. The exploitation of SEPTs is illustrated by contrasting the work of SEPTs with the work of other atypical, but similar occupations. The limitations to individual expressions of resistance are discussed, but the focus of the paper is on the potential for trade union organizing and collective resistance. Whereas high levels of competition between SEPTs and the individual identity of SEPTs as micro-entrepreneurs diminish the prospect of collective action, we propose coopetition as an organizing logic whereby SEPTs compete with one another but also cooperate in order to reduce exploitation by the gym. For the SEPT specifically, and micro-entrepreneurs in direct and proximal competition more generally, coopetition represents an opportunity to cooperate, while maintaining the ability to compete with one another. This is a distinct approach to that of freelance worker representation discussed above. The data reveal pessimism on the part of interviewees and survey respondents to spontaneous collective action, but a broadly positive response among SEPTs to trade unions. Moreover, efforts by gyms towards the [substantive and symbolic] assimilation of SEPTs serve to establish the foundation for coopetition and a collective consciousness. We propose coopetition as a logic for organizing highly individualised workers without compromising their individual identity and in order to represent SEPT interests and resist exploitation by organizations that appropriate their labour. The paper also serves as a foundation for research into the trade union representation of

other workers who perceive themselves as [micro-]entrepreneurs and who face similar challenges.

The growth in solo self-employment and the replacement of contracts *of* service by contracts *for* services is unlikely to slow in the wake of the pandemic. Whereas the overall number of solo self-employed workers has fallen since the pandemic, a large proportion - around 13 per cent - has entered solo self-employment since 2021. The commercialization of employment presents as an attractive prospect for firms seeking to maximise profitability through [labour] cost savings via commercialized work contracts or the threat of their use to secure concessions from staff. In this way, commercialization of employment serves as a form of domestic social dumping whereby the reduced terms and conditions of dependent work among staff in the same geographical context undermines the terms and conditions of standard employment. Non-standard work poses a significant problem for the labour movement. Among the solo self-employed it is the worker who has internalized the micro-entrepreneur narrative and who motivated by self-interest represents the greatest challenge to collectivism. Coopetition provides a logic on which to organize micro-entrepreneurs thereby offering a source of trade union revitalisation and a necessary bulwark to the commercialization of work. Coopetitive representation that emphasizes fairness while allowing for individual ambition may be a means to developing an entrepreneurial class mindful of the exigency of equity and supportive of decent work.

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Table 1. Factors that explain the Distinctiveness of SEPT Exploitation

	Hair stylists	Strip dancers	SEPTs
Necessity of skill	High	High	Low
Structural importance	High	High	Low
Barrier to entry	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Competition	Moderate	Low	High

Table 2. False self-employment, neo-villeiny and genuine self-employment

	Dependent work	Neo-villeiny	Genuine self-employment
Extent of managerial coercion	High	Moderate-high	Low
Ownership of the means of production	Low	Low	High
Dependency on a single client	High	Low	Low
Individualistic orientation	Low	High	High

Table 3. Extent to which REPs, NRPT and CIMPSA do enough to represent the needs and status of personal trainers as a group.

	Disagree	Neither	Agree
• Protecting the rights of personal trainers	55.6	25	19.5
• Representing the interests of personal trainers in the industry	48.6	23.6	27.8
• Representing the interests of personal trainers with government	56.4	28.2	15.5

Table 4. Perceived benefit of trade union representation

	Disagree	Neither	Agree
Perceived benefit of independent representation	25.7	27.3	46.9
Perceived benefit of trade union	22.6	31	46.5

Would personal trainers work collectively	27.2	41.8	30.9