

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# 'I Can Just Do Work I'm Paid to Do': Hybrid Work and Tertiary Labour Time Gains

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**Received:** 24 March 2025 | **Revised:** 26 March 2025 | **Accepted:** 28 March 2025

**Funding:** This research was supported by the UK Research and Innovation Funding (Grant Number ES/V003976/2).

## ABSTRACT

This paper adopts a moral economy framework to analyse the unique and collective experience of remote work during the UK pandemic lockdowns. Through analysis of qualitative interviews with workers based at home during periods of lockdown, we explore how this offered workers a new opportunity to evaluate a particular type of work extensification experienced when working onsite. We found that workers gained clarity over 'preparing-for-work', commuting and other unpaid labour as unfairly burdening nonwork time and social goods like family, health and leisure. We expand on the idea of tertiary time to suggest that hybrid work, despite its potential drawbacks, is viewed by workers as a way to regain some control over this area of their lives. By examining this in terms of the concept of lay normativity, our analysis draws out the importance of personal needs and emotional connections. We identify how, during the pandemic's extreme circumstances, a new opportunity for evaluation emerged that facilitated the development of a new sentiment around tertiary time devoted to the commute and preparation for work.

## 1 | Introduction

This paper focuses on the social good of the opportunity for rest and leisure of working people in the contemporary UK and the contested context for this social good through changes in the nature of working time. The historic downward trend of paid working hours (Roche 1991; Bell and Hart 2023) ended in the 1970s, moving to a more complicated picture (Green 2002), reflecting a diversification and fragmentation in working time (Devetter and Valentin 2024). For some, the extensification of work, including unpaid overtime (Bell et al. 2000; Papagiannaki et al. 2021), taking work home or being on call outside of work hours (Golden and Geisler 2007; Howcroft and Taylor 2024) puts increased pressure on opportunities for rest and leisure. It is against this background that we examine the recent expansion of hybrid work following the sudden and widespread changes brought about by lockdown measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We focus on an

emergence of a sense of entitlement to hybrid work among working people in the UK and, utilising the concept of lay normativity (Sayer 2000, 2005, 2011), we examine how and why, in the period immediately following these lockdown measures, working people believed it to be a fair economic practice they aspired to see preserved.

Hybrid work refers to working away from employer or client premises a portion of an employees' contractual time. Since 2020, it has significantly expanded in several countries, including the UK, for job roles which can be performed remotely. UK post-pandemic surveys consistently show that hybrid work is desirable by the vast majority of respondents, typically representing as high a portion as 85% of employees (Office for National Statistics [ONS] 2021; FDA 2022; Skountridaki et al. 2024). There is also an indication that this is an upward trend, with a CIPD study (2023) showing that the number of people wanting to work offsite increased between

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2022 and 2023, in 46% of the surveyed organisations. The same study suggests that lack of flexibility was the driving cause of career change for an estimated 4 million people (12% of employees) and the driving cause of leaving a job/sector for an estimated 2 million people (6% of employees) during the same period.

Employers' demands do not always match employee hybrid work expectations which is a cause of employee grievances (e.g., see Gray et al. 2024 or Wyatt 2024). It is indicative of the strength of feeling on this issue that employer pressure for increased office presence has been met with employee resistance, disobedience, dissent or discontent. For example, in high-profile technology giants, Amazon has seen workers staging a walkout to protest against an 'inequitable return-to-the-office mandate' (The Guardian 2023) and UK Amazon workers publicly stated that the return to the office mandate is 'dismissing their humanity' (Wyatt 2024). Apple workers have petitioned against a return-to-the-office policy, with over 10,000 Apple workers joining a remote-work advocacy group online (McGee 2022). Furthermore, trade unions have started joining the fight for the right to work from home. For example, public service trade unions in France signed an agreement with the public services employer covering issues including the voluntary nature of remote work and the right to disconnect (ETUC 2022). Regulation on flexible work has also been revised in the UK and overseas to strengthen and protect workers' rights to work flexibly. In sum, survey data, documented worker mobilisation and regulatory changes, all point to new norms in the world of work with regards to flexible and hybrid work. Hybrid work is now an expectation employees view as worth fighting for.

In this paper, we document how the enforced working-from-home practice in the UK opened up a space for reflection and evaluation on key aspects of working time and associated practices. Our contribution emerges from our participants' re-conceptualisation of nonwork but essential to work activities as labour. This includes activities such as commuting and preparing for work, with our participants claiming for the associated effort and time demands to return to their private life, for at least part of the working week. We draw on 70 interviews with a range of UK workers conducted in 2021 to analyse how working away from employers' premises became normalised not only as 'a modern way of work' but also as a fair one. We conceptualise 'preparing-for-work' as a distinctive form of labour and work extensification associated with tertiary time (Howcroft and Taylor 2024; Standing 2013). Utilising the lens of lay normativity, we examine what our participants consider worthy of their time and effort (e.g., family, friends, care, wellbeing, productive working lives) and what is considered nonworthy (e.g., time, money and energy spent in commuting and preparing to work). We also show that the flexibility enabled by hybrid work, which has largely been missing from working peoples' daily lives, turns from a rhetorical claim—a key component of scholarly analyses (Findlay and Thompson 2017; Warhurst and Knox 2022) and policy frameworks on fair work (e.g., the 'Fair Work' framework in Scotland, 2023; Job quality in employment studies, or Good Jobs in the CIPD's approach)—to a legitimate expectation in workers' consciousness The Fair Work Convention (2023).

The paper is organised as follows. In the next section, we put into historical context the limited opportunity of workers to rest and leisure. Next, we present our conceptual framework, derived from a moral economy perspective, to examine the role of hybrid work in people's lives. We present our methods and move on to the findings, showcasing change in the common sentiment around hybrid work in relation to tertiary time. Finally, our discussion develops the key contributions of the paper and, in our conclusion, points to areas requiring future research.

## 1.1 | Rest and Leisure as Diminished Social Goods

The actual and normative clock-time discipline that was gradually imposed on workers and social relations after the industrial revolution to enable the synchronisation of work (Thompson 1963, 1967) became largely uncontested. Yet, the length of work time turned out to be a major field of contestation in industrial relations in the UK (Roche 1991), a field where workers' struggles marked considerable success. Examining the working time trends in the 20th century UK, for example, Roche (1991) describes grassroot and union disputes which led to significant reductions in contractual working time (from 47 h in 1945 to 39 h in 1987), often fairing much better than the more insecure gains in wage increases (Arrowsmith 2002). Roche argues that the trend was observed both in blue and white-collar jobs, and notes that most reductions took place in periods of low unemployment and economic prosperity, when workers had an advantage. In the post-war period until 1975, however, Arrowsmith (2002) observes the institutionalisation of paid overtime in the UK, which was widely welcome by workers as a means of boosting their modest wages. The end of the 20th century found one in five men working over 48 h (Arrowsmith 2002).

However, aggregated figures hide a more complex picture. For example, this period has also seen an increase in women's working hours, which accelerated further during the pandemic with the ONS attributing the change to the spreading of flexible work (Office for National Statistics 2024a). Beyond gender, we have seen significant changes in part-time or zero hours contracts, reflecting a diversification and fragmentation in working time (Devetter and Valentin 2024). The intensification of work in the UK is a well-documented phenomenon (Green 2002, 2004; Green et al. 2022), no less among workers adopting flexible work practices (Kelliher and Anderson 2010). Multifaceted work extensification persists across a range of occupations of both low and highly skilled workers, further problematising the official statistics on reduced working hours (Jarvis and Pratt 2006; Scholarios et al. 2018; Hassard and Morris 2022). Whilst paid overtime has declined (Bell and Hart 2023), unpaid overtime persists. Bell et al. (2000) estimated that men in the UK worked on average 8.5 h and women 6.3 h of unpaid overtime a week and Papagiannaki et al. (2021) estimated that unpaid overtime in the UK is equal to 6.33% of GDP. Importantly, studies such as Pulignano et al. (2024) investigation of platform work have highlighted 'proximate' unpaid work, such as travel time between clients' locations, networking and professional development time. Jarvis and Pratt

(2006) describe the ‘overflowing’ of work (both precarious and secure) as temporal, spatial but also physical and mental with implications on household, dependents, health and social activities.

Following Howcroft and Taylor’s (2024) recent contribution, we consider this ‘overflowing’ or work extensification as a distinctive type of ‘tertiary’ labour time and note that, whilst widespread, it has been missing from current scholarly discussions. Howcroft and Taylor (2024, 72) draw on Standing’s (2013) tertiary time as activities outside contractual working hours and refer to ‘work-for-labour’ (which ‘may include time invested in searching for jobs, networking outside formalised hours or ‘catching-up’ at home’) and ‘training-for-labour’ (which refers to Standing’s description of workers self-training and skills upgrade). We argue that tertiary time includes one more form of labour, which we name ‘preparing-for-work’. Preparing-for-work labour draws our attention to employees’ dedication of a significant part of their nonwork time in nonwork but essential-to-work activities. Specifically, we refer to commute time (and effort), which are rarely compensated by employers; and preparation for work time (and effort), including activities such as lunch preparation, dressing (smart), purchasing, cleaning and ironing clothing worn in the office. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, commuting time, a considerable time-burden for employees, was increasing (TUC 2019). The daily commute may add anything from 2 h to 5 or 10 h a week to employees’ schedule, and the preparation for work rituals may add anything from 1 to 2½ or more hours. Whilst nonwork activities, both commute and preparing for work, are essential to work (or actually essential to *on-site* work). Nonetheless, this time and effort as ‘sacrifice’ from employee non-work hours has largely been taken as a given by most employees and employers.

## 1.2 | Moral Economies for Flexible Work

To further our analysis of tertiary time and preparing-for-work labour, we utilise a moral economy conceptual framework. Central to this approach is an understanding, developed from the work of Polanyi (1957), that markets are embedded in societies and social relations in different ways (see e.g., Booth 1994). Polanyi emphasised the dangers of economic activities becoming disembedded from the social sphere, and social activities becoming determined by economic calculation (Booth 1994). Moral economy approaches such as that of Sayer agree with Polanyi on the importance of re-embedding the economy in social relations but have placed greater emphasis on the persistent influences and importance of the social, even in our current market economies. For Sayer (2000, 79), ‘The moral economy embodies norms and sentiments regarding the responsibilities and rights of individuals and institutions with respect to others’. The evaluation of working time, conceived from a moral economy perspective, is not the product of homo economicus but evaluated in terms of a range of roles and responsibilities and by people with ‘personal needs and emotional connections’ (Elder-Vass 2022, 98).

Sayer’s concept of lay normativity focuses on people’s everyday reflexive moral capabilities. As Sayer notes, lay normativity is

fundamentally about what matters to people, it brings to the foreground teleological ideas on the ‘the definition of what is valuable or worthwhile’ and what is not (Sayer 2005, 3). Examples of what matters to people range from specific worries such as ‘how they should bring up their children’; ‘concerns about whether others are treating them fairly and respectfully’; ‘or reflections on the way their lives are going in terms of balancing goods such as friendship and achievement’ (Sayer 2005, 7). We judge people and practices as good or bad, Sayer argues, based on how they shape the quality of our experiences. For example, when we work for an organisation ‘we worry about how we will be treated, whether it will be friendly, democratic and fair or hostile, authoritarian and oppressive’ (Sayer 2011, 10). Such evaluations may be confused or contradictory but they are vitally important elements of people’s rationales.

A moral economy framework is conceptually powerful in that it situates lay attitudes, values and meanings (lay normativity) within the historical materiality of social relations and the working environment (of exploitation) (Kirk 2023). This is particularly useful for this study, which proposes that the specific context of lockdowns and related restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic created the space for an evaluation of working time and the possibilities of flexible work. In Thompson’s (1971, 57) work, the formation of consciousness of shared interests, including entitlement to goods, working conditions or customs, is understood as the achievement of ‘self-definition’ among groups of people, which presupposes ‘clarity of objectives’. The formation of expectations, therefore, is the cornerstone of clear objectives with the realisation that these expectations and objectives are shared, preceding the development of solidarities among people.

Moral economy becomes ever more relevant when a normative consensus concerning entitlements changes. Thompson (1963, 407) discussed in some depth that self-consciousness is ‘sharpened by loss’. He refers to ‘grievances’ for non-market-like economic practices which workers experienced after the industrial revolution: ‘the disruption of the traditional family economy: the discipline, monotony, hours and conditions of work: loss of leisure and amenities the reduction of the man to the status of an “instrument”’ (Thompson 1963, 203). What is of particular significance for this article, is the emphasis Thompson (1963, 203) places on the working peoples’ ‘grievance’ on non-wage entitlements as factors shaping the formation of working peoples’ sentiment around their interests. The focus on loss of leisure is also of relevance here. Most recently, Posusney (1993, 85) carefully notes in their study of strikes in Egypt that workers’ protests reflected their entitlement to working conditions which were improved in the period before mobilisation, and reacted when improvements were taken away. Phillips’ (2013) work similarly focuses on the history of coalmine strikes in Scotland, understood as coalmine workers’ active defence of their longstanding expectation of job security and joint regulation. Loss of improvements in working conditions, thus, sharpens clarity over shared objectives. Worker’s evaluations of what had been lost and gained, what was worthwhile and what was not, formed a fascinating opportunity for qualitative interviews with workers suddenly forced to work from home in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2 | Methods

This paper draws on interview data collected from UK-based workers as part of a larger mixed methods study that took place between 2020 and 2022. The study focused on remote work at the onset of lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic and evolved into the study of hybrid work with the easing of lockdown measures in 2021. The study involved two surveys of circa 1400 UK home-based workers each (in June–July 2020 and December 2020–February 2021), and four rounds of semi-structured interviews from a pool of 90 workers from across the UK (in spring 2020, late summer 2020, winter 2021 and summer 2021). Participants were recruited via newspaper advertisements, social media posts, and the word of the mouth. Whilst sampling was, thus, largely convenience sampling, the researchers ensured that the participants' panel is balanced in terms of gender, that employees from all four UK nations are included, and that there is a range of job roles. As such, whilst the sample predominantly comprises of desk-based jobs, includes both high and low-skilled labour. Some of the participants had secure and highly remunerated roles (such as professionals and managers) whilst others modestly or low-paid and insecure jobs (such as customer or call centre operators; IT support officers; a reservations' manager; product support officer; events officer; personal assistant; administration officers; income recovery officer; clerks amongst others). The vast majority had no or little experience of working offsite prior to the pandemic reflecting the nationwide statistics (Office for National Statistics 2019). The collected data, thus, capture the experience of homeworking across a range of the UK population and the lives, as well as the first experiences of hybrid work as workers start returning to employers' premises with the easing of lockdown measures in 2021. The study focused on work experiences including among others the role of work space, technology, wellbeing, work–life balance and productivity.

This paper draws on the fourth round of semi-structured interviews, which took place between late May and August 2021. In total, 70 UK workers were interviewed, with interviews lasting from 35 to 110 min and average time of 50 min. The audio recordings of the interviews were professionally transcribed. The question guide included five main discussion areas including participants' reflections on their working practices and wellbeing, questions around the return-to-the-office and hybrid work arrangements, evaluation of productivity in remote and hybrid work, reasons to return to the office or work offsite and finally reflection on potential changes in their attitudes to life, work and policy, including employees' 'right to request flexible work from Day 1'.

The first author engaged in thematic analysis through iterative coding (Braun and Clarke 2012) to identify sub-themes relating to hybrid work experiences and expectations with the easing of social distancing restrictions. The first round of coded sub-themes emerging from the data related, first, to push and pull factors to work in the office/at home. Analysed using the moral economy framework and, in particular, lay normativity (Sayer 2000, 2005, 2011), this material revealed how participants' reasoning was centred around reducing hardship and supporting wellbeing. Lay normativity helps us see the moral evaluations in people's argumentation as they discuss what is

worthy of their time and effort and what is not worthy. Lay normativity also helps us understand the shifting understandings of working time and, in particular, the ways in which, following the lockdown measures of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees re-evaluated the commute and preparing for work as a form of tertiary labour time and, thus, a form of work extensification. As a result, they became emotionally committed to the possibilities and fairness of the flexibility afford by hybrid working arrangements (Table 1).

A moral economy framework allows us to move beyond 'work–life balance' discussions, which are embedded in the market logic and do not challenge the standard employment relation. Instead, a moral economy lens helps us see how our participants' priorities are nested in non-market institutions, such as the family, and in a morality that reflects their human condition of vulnerability. Our participants talk about significant matters in their lives, such as their children's vulnerabilities or their relations with their partners to explain why hybrid work makes a difference in their lives. The absence of certain work requirements (such as commuting) opened a space for reflection and brought into question some of the take-for-granted expectations of the employment relation and working time. Overall, the emergent higher-level themes in our analysis reflect how these experiences shaped participants' attitudes towards work, made them accustomed to working from home and led to evaluation of hybrid work as a fair practice they expected to maintain in the long term.

## 3 | Findings

We here utilise with the concept of lay normativity to analyse the moral evaluations around the future of hybrid work in the UK in our participants' narratives, what they see as worthwhile and what is not. A lay normativity lens reveals how participants' reasoning is centred around the role of flexibility made available through hybrid working in reducing hardship in their daily lives and in supporting wellbeing. Far from exhibiting solely rational, calculative reasoning, our participants engage in a form of highly emotional reflection and evaluation that is deeply engaged with a sense of what matters to them.

### 3.1 | Evaluations: Not Worthwhile

Most notably, in the context of having experienced the forced relocation of their work in the home due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the burden of getting ready and getting to work was seen by the majority of our participants as detrimental to the quality of their experience and an obstacle to 'good life' (Booth 1994, 655).

*The things that stop me wanting to go into the office, so I think it's the logistics of getting ready for a work day. It sounds ridiculous, but just putting your work clothes on, packing a lunch, making sure you've got money, finding your pass. It does not take out even only 10 minutes for me, it takes an hour out of your day easily.*

Freya, 25–35, Analytics Manager



TABLE 1 | Coding scheme.

Themes emerging from the data	ME concepts	Interrelating themes with ME concepts
<p>Preparing for work &amp; commuting 5 days a week seen as an old, poor, unnecessary practice.</p> <p>Reduced/avoiding preparing for work &amp; commute time and effort is desirable, modern.</p> <p>Reasoning: Preparing for work &amp; commuting time and effort used for physical exercise, caring responsibilities, quality time with family or friends, life admin, better manage health issues, productive work.</p>	<p>Lay evaluations/lay normativity centred around non-market-like goods and priorities.</p> <p>Social goods and non-market-like priorities govern conceptions of good life (Booth 1994; Sayer 2011).</p>	<p><i>Lay normativity: Re-evaluating what is worthy of time and effort and what is not</i></p> <p>Not worthy of time and effort, depletes opportunity for social goods rest or leisure.</p> <p>Worthy of time and effort, alleviates daily hardship.</p> <p>Nonwork time, rest and leisure as social goods.</p> <p>Tertiary time and effort gains used for physical exercise, caring responsibilities, quality time with family or friends, life admin, better manage health issues.</p> <p><i>Tertiary time gains: Commute and preparing for work as tertiary labour time &amp; Change in the sentiment around flexible work: a new economic practice worthwhile preserving</i></p>
<p>Remote work—enforced during the pandemic lockdowns in the UK on a large part of the workforce—was a new experience for many workers.</p> <p>After COVID-19 nonwork priorities are reframed from irrelevant to relevant to work, and thus entry to the sphere of work/working time is normalised.</p> <p>Hybrid and flexible work are seen as ‘modern’ and the Monday–Friday 9–5 office work as outdated and ‘traditional’.</p> <p>Some participants did not use the full of tertiary labour gains for rest and leisure, wellness or caring and other responsibilities. Some of the newfound gains in tertiary time were given back to work, often as a means to cope with workload-related time pressure.</p>	<p>Moral economy situates lay normativity in its historical material context (Kirk 2023).</p>	<p>Context:</p> <p>(1) Work time trends: time deprivation against the background of work intensification and extensification in contemporary UK; (2) the unique experience of remote work during the pandemic lockdowns in the UK.</p> <p>Within this context, workers gain clarity over a particular type of work extensification they are subject to when working onsite: ‘preparing for work’ is now reconceptualised as labour.</p> <p>As a result, we see a change in the sentiment around flexible work, which is seen as a new economic practice worthwhile preserving.</p> <p>Tertiary time gains returned to work?</p> <p>To alleviate daily life hardship associated with overtime and heavy workloads, some of the newfound gains in tertiary time were given back to work.</p> <p><i>A new, shared and fair sentiment around hybrid and flexible work</i></p>
<p>Interviewee narratives point to a wider understanding of hybrid work preferences as common and shared expectations among employees.</p>	<p>Emergence of shared consciousness around an economic practice which promotes a social good (Thompson 1971, 1991; Booth 1994).</p>	<p>The new sentiment around hybrid and flexible work is common/shared.</p> <p>Several of our interviewees show awareness and often empathy</p>

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Themes emerging from the data	ME concepts	Interrelating themes with ME concepts
Expectations around flexible work change, the future of work is imagined as flexible and flexibility is seen as depending on individual circumstances: Several of our interviewees comment on their peers' conditions which are different to their own, such as home crowdedness, longer/shorter distance between work and home and commute time, caring responsibilities or potential illness and wellbeing issues.		towards conditions different to their own, such as home crowdedness, longer/shorter distance between work and home and commute time, caring responsibilities or potential illness and wellbeing issues.
Interviewees see a significant positive impact of flexible work on the employees and no detriment to the employer. Strong sense of entitlement to hybrid and flexible work. When asked about their view on whether flexible work should be a right from Day 1 of employment, the vast majority of participants agreed that it should be. Justifications were underpinned by conceptions of fairness.	A new economic practice justified as fair (Thompson 1971, 1991; Booth 1994). Loss of entitlement to a fair economic practice which diminishes a social good (Thompson 1963, 1971, 1991; Posusney 1993; Perchard and Phillips 2011; Phillips 2013).	A fair way of work Depriving workers of the opportunity for hybrid and flexible work is described as loss of entitlement to a fair economic practice and a social good.

For some of our participants (in our sample, all were women), the work-related nonwork labour appears elevated due to aesthetic labour when preparing for work. For example:

*I feel like the way that I present myself has shifted over this last year and a half...that I'm more comfortable with the way I am at home, if that makes sense. I don't have to put on make-up, I don't have to do my hair, I don't have to put on the office clothes. I can just do work which is what I'm paid to do [...] It's shifted my priorities from work being the foremost issue from the time that I wake up to the time that I go to sleep, to how to get to work, what time I need to be in work, what to wear for work, what to eat at work, and doing this.*

Katie, 36–45, Income Recovery Officer

Many of our interviewees had come to see daily preparing for work as an unreasonable expectation, and distinctive to work they are remunerated for ('I can just do work which is what I'm paid to do'). These were often explicitly reflections from the perspective of large scale, widespread changes necessitated by the pandemic and participants often described them as new insights ('its shifted my priorities'), as though they had come to suddenly question previously take-for-granted assumptions, that what had been seen as normal was now up for debate.

To many of our participants, it seems incomprehensible how pre-pandemic they endured 'exhaustion', 'tiredness', a feeling of

being 'rushed all the time', running around like 'headless chicken', or 'stressing about everything' when fully working in the office. Rest and leisure were largely discussed as a diminished social good, exhausted between market and non-market work and responsibilities (Nackerdien 2021). The rhetorical question of 'How did we do it before? How were we commuting 5 days?' one of our participants posed, summarises the sentiment around the pre-pandemic work experience of many.

Our participants' narratives reveal forms of resentment about the past and simultaneously the imagination of a new future. The vast majority of interviewees imagine or feel entitled to a future of work without a full return to the office. They cannot imagine 'ever being back in the office 9–5, Monday–Friday', 'sleepwalking' back into the past, or returning to the 'traditional' way of working. In our participants' narratives hybrid work is a 'modern', new way of working which reflects how 'society has changed'. For many, if there is anything that the pandemic taught us, is that there is no need to be fully working in the office,

*I can't see us ever being back in the office 9 to 5, Monday to Friday, ever again. Because it's just, there's no need for us to be [there]. I think that's what [the lockdowns] taught us. We can still do as much business and keep our clients happy and also why would I sit in traffic for an hour if I don't need to?*

Olivia, 36–45, Mortgage and Insurance Advisor

### 3.2 | Evaluations: Worthwhile

The reconceptualization of 'preparing-for-work' labour from common practice to unacceptable, emerged strongly from our data. For example,

*Working from home is great, the weekend feels like I've got loads of energy. I'm not the same as I used to be where I used to get home at 18:00 on a Friday and want to just eat dinner and go to bed pretty much. And the next thing I know Sunday is here and I'm back, I'm thinking about ironing my shirts and getting ready to pack my bag for work.*

Jamie, 36–45, Project Manager

The majority of our study participants saw opportunities to meaningfully engage with family and friends or chores and physical exercise throughout the day as important and re-evaluated the lack of opportunity to do so as unreasonable. Family and social relations emerge as a strong theme in participants' reasoning. This is perhaps unsurprising from a moral economy lens, for it situates the household at the top of (non-market) communities, in which people are the purpose, the telos of activities (Booth 1994). For example,

*[Working from home means that] I see more of my wife because she has a sort of been a, been very much the long hours culture. And she certainly couldn't have coped with her current job and the current project she's on over the past six or twelve months, if she had had to go in the office and I wouldn't have seen her until midnight most days, which was ridiculous.*

Andrew, 46–55, Accountant

Our participants use the pre-pandemic work time patterns as a benchmark to assess their work and nonwork time post-pandemic. Changes in working time patterns of this unique historical moment shape workers' experiences and evaluations, bringing into questioning time spent outside work on work-related activities.

Many participants were emotionally invested in the opportunity to spend more time with their loved ones or better care for them. The parent quoted below shares their worry about their child's vulnerabilities and, at the same time, the relief in the newfound opportunity to work flexibly.

*They know my son is on spectrum of Autism, they know he's got medical needs [...] but obviously I'm not telling them that we had to ring crisis line many times because of his anxiety or that he had real hallucinations or you know things were really bad when he really was even suicidal, I didn't feel comfortable to share that knowledge with them because I think people when they haven't faced that they won't be able to understand [...] [Worth] more flexibility we can work better because I've been like today working, I should finish half past two but I had to finish at one to be able to pick up my boy for physio. So, if I wouldn't be able to do that, I would probably have to reschedule his appointment when actually I finish earlier*

*but I will still catch up with my work later on. [...] In these circumstances his appointment was a priority and I felt comfortable I didn't have to ask. I've just went and picked him up and then I finished later on.*

Helen, 26–35, Adviser

### 3.3 | New Sentiments: Flexibility

Hybrid and flexible work are seen as a practice which enhances the capacity to care for dependants and be more responsive to their needs. As Sayer put it, worries such as 'how they should bring up their children' or 'concerns about whether others are treating them fairly and respectfully' matter to people (Sayer 2005, 7). The ability to easily integrate nonwork responsibilities during the work day also matters and it often appears as dignifying workers' flexibility,

*You know like even those simple tasks that before we would have to plan for like a delivery driver delivering a big parcel. Or your kids needed picking up or a doctor's appointment like these things that are now fitting into my life easily. I can go to the doctors and I can come back and have done in half an hour. Whereas, before I would have had to okay that with my boss, I might even have to take flexi time, take an afternoon of annual leave.*

Jamie, 36–45, Project Manager

Opportunities for flexibility are re-interpreted as the spatio-temporal element that has always been missing,

*I just think flexibility is key in the future for working, society has changed in terms of work [...] We just go through life me and my wife with just always working, living for the weekends and then stressing about everything because you don't have five minutes to do anything. And then actually, when this happens, finding out that you could, like I was saying, you could shoehorn a doctor's appointment at the end of the day. Or go to the bank at lunchtime if you want because I'm working from home today, I can walk across the road. Those kind of things... [In] a modern society [the] work pattern is different.*

Jamie, 36–45, Project Manager

After COVID-19, nonwork priorities are reframed from irrelevant to relevant to work, and thus entry to the sphere of work and working time is normalised ('[In] a modern society [the] work pattern is different'). What we effectively see is how 'preparing for work' is now reconceptualised as labour. Under this reconceptualization, people's conception of hybrid work serves as a means to—at least to some extent and occasions—control aspects of work extensification.

### 3.4 | A Shared Sentiment

Furthermore, our data reveal a sense of shared understandings around the future of work. Thompson (1963) emphasis on the

role of 'grievances' related to non-wage entitlements, like the loss of leisure time, in shaping the formation of working peoples' consciousness around their interests aids us in framing our findings. We were able to identify a common sentiment around the entitlement to hybrid work permeating our diverse and dispersed cohort of participants. Nonetheless, our participants were also able to reflect on the shift as shared. 'It's a lot of similar sentiment particularly around homeworking' one of our participants noted. Several others, allude to a *shared* understanding of no return from hybrid work, reflecting the collective experience of a sudden change in working practices across a significant proportion of the workforce. Their narratives validate what employee surveys have been showing, namely a strong preference for hybrid work by the vast majority of respondents, but also point to a wider understanding of those preferences as collective and shared expectations. Our participants refer to 'people', 'everybody', 'team chats' or staff survey results to convey with confidence that expectations are shared.

*It feels like everybody understands that this is just the new way [of work] you know, and everybody is in the same position, and everybody is going to be working in this hybrid way of working going forward, so it doesn't feel like an adjustment to your contract would be necessary because everybody would be working differently.*

Janet, 46–55, IT Officer

*[The organisation] did a survey and the survey was the majority of people preferred to do it split days in the office and days at home, rather than going full time back to the office.*

Katie, 36–45, Income Recovery Officer

At the same time, most participants acknowledge that the circumstances that shape their own office/home preferences may differ to those of their colleagues. Several of our interviewees show awareness and often empathy towards conditions different to their own, such as home crowdedness, longer/shorter distance between work and home and commute time, caring responsibilities or potential illness and wellbeing issues. Workers do not expect that their ideal work preference coincides with everyone else's. Nevertheless, they insist that traditional ways of work appeal to a small minority, which is now the exception to the 'rule'. However, it is important to note that this imagined future for our participants does not reflect possible new and unrecognised flexible work challenges (see e.g., Chung 2022). This is beyond the scope of this examination of participants' reflection in the period returning to work after the pandemic measures. At this point in time and engaged in these reflections, many of our participants' lay evaluations depict flexible ways of work as not only new and shared but also fair.

### 3.5 | A Fair Way of Work

Participants did draw on a form of market rationality to explain that there were also benefits for their employers, deploying arguments around enhanced or sustained productivity and work efficiency as well as reduced hardship and improved wellbeing. A significant portion of participants feel that they 'have

shown' they are productive when working from home, that can be or are trusted to do their job offsite, and that should be 'treated like adults' moving forward.

*[Flexible work] makes a huge difference to the employee. [...] I don't think it makes as big of a difference to the employer.*

Marilyn, 18–25, Finance Associate

*You know, from that, my working day might have been, say, a seven and a half hour working day. I might work eight hours now at home because I don't have the travel time or, you know, the prep time to go into the office, etc.*

Jude, 26–35, Programme Manager

When asked about their view on whether flexible work should be a right from Day 1 of employment, the vast majority of participants agreed that it should be (those few who did not agree, did not disagree either but cautioned, instead, that not all jobs can be performed remotely). Justifications were underpinned by conceptions of fairness. Again, participants do not only draw on their own quality experiences to justify their position, but also to those of their colleagues, family or friends. For example, Maria, a young business analyst explains,

*Yes, I think we definitely should be able to do that. I mean, for example, from my personal experience I started in a new team working from home and there was absolutely no issues with it, so I think we should. [INT: And can you tell me why?] I mean it gives many opportunities not just to—I mean, I think, for me not as many, it doesn't give as many opportunities for me, but for somebody who has children, for somebody who is disabled and it takes then twice as long or three times as long to get to the office, that is a massive opportunity. For example, my sister-in-law she's suffered from disability so she's got chronic pain, she's got quite a few conditions and this [opportunity] has opened the world for her [...] She can be in pain but she can do still counselling [to clients] because she doesn't have to commute to an office. So, it is, for some people it will be a lot better than others, and it can become, society can become more equal.*

As in the previous quote, the interviewee sees a significant positive impact of flexible work for the employees at no detriment to the employer. It would be a mistake to assume, however, that workers have the power to impose on the organisations they work for arrangements they see as fair. Most acknowledge that the common sentiment may be heard by employers but not necessarily listened to. Participants typically attribute the future of hybrid work in their organisation to senior management preferences and discuss widespread surveys as largely consultative.

### 3.6 | Tertiary Time Gains and Unpaid Work

Despite the positivity expressed by our participants, and reflecting observations over widespread unpaid



overtime in the UK (Arrowsmith 2002; Bell et al. 2000; Papagiannaki et al. 2021), heavy workloads remain a daily reality for a significant portion of our participants. Most interviewees describe their work as output-based with around a third of participants (23 out of 70) feeling uncomfortable about the levels of output expected to deliver. In the context of heavy workloads, not returning to the office seems reasonable but also a double-edged mechanism to cope with overtime.

There is a consensus among participants, including those who described their workload as reasonable, that working from home is conducive to working longer hours and that work can easily 'creep in' nonwork time.

*Sometimes you stay longer on your work computer when you're working from home than if, like, for example, you went to the office, your set time to leave is your set time to leave, right? There are some days that there are exceptions still, but not as often as when you're working from home, you tend to just stay longer hours on your laptop, on your computer.*

Kirsty, 46–55, Communications Officer

By association, some participants did not fully utilise their tertiary labour gains for rest and leisure, wellness or caring and other responsibilities. Some of the newfound gains in tertiary time were given back as (unpaid) work both by participants who described their workload as reasonable and unreasonable. Most commonly, participants described how they used the commute and preparing for work time to start working earlier in the morning, work after 5 pm, or take shorter lunch breaks. For example,

*If I am at work, I sign on at eight o'clock because I will arrive at eight o'clock and then I've got to turn my computer on, it warms up and then I will read my memos, that will take like twenty minutes some times and then I will start my work. But when I am at home, I have already turned the computer on ready to start at eight o'clock and I have usually read my memos because I just make a cup of tea, so I will read my memos so I will be all ready to work straight away.*

Emma, 46–55, Document Service Clerk

Working from home is also described as a mechanism to avoid or cope with workload accumulated during sick leave or annual leave.

*And if I felt ill for example, just a bit under the weather, so if you had to go into an office you'd think, 'Oh I can't get into the office today, I feel dreadful'. But you can stay at home and sort of sit in bed with your laptop, you know, you can keep going. Which probably isn't the way to do it. But I quite like that because you don't feel like you've had a lot of absence from the office, you know, when you were able to work it's just you couldn't really, you know, you didn't feel like driving in to work and sitting at a desk*

*when you just didn't feel great. [...] working from home kind of makes it feel easier.*

Kirsty, 46–55, Communications Officer

Workload pressure, experienced by around a third of our participants, translates into time pressure, and giving tertiary gains back to work when working from home is described as a way to cope with unreasonable workloads. When working in the office, in contrast, it may feel easier to avoid overtime, either that is occasionally necessary (e.g., after a sick or an annual leave) or regularly occurring:

*The reality of my day is that I am in meetings until four or five and then two–three hours work comes after that. So, the meetings that I have are not always scheduled, they are 'oh, something urgent happened and we need your help'; 'oh, can you have a look on that'; 'can you help us, can you just do this or do that'. They are not planned; they are not something you can easily communicate. While if you were in the office and someone saw you being on calls from 8.30 to 5, then at 5 you would be like, you know what, this is going to have to wait until next week.*

Zoe, 36–45, Researcher

Finally, three of our interviewees felt that remote work was strategically used by their employer to increase workloads or that it would be hard to revise output expectations downwards to pre-pandemic and onsite work levels. These participants were concerned that the output boost that homeworking affords is normalised,

*I don't see that there would be any switch between them still wanting you to produce what you're producing, but not necessarily factoring in all the other things because you know my day would be shorter because I would have that commute either side of the day. I wouldn't be able to log on when I got in [my home] because I would be more exhausted from that travelling. But then they'd still [...] expect you to do what you have been doing.*

Kerry, 26–35, Project Officer

Interestingly, as the analysis above indicates, when evaluating the opportunity for flexibility that comes with the potential for hybrid work post-pandemic, our participants reflect more on the tertiary time gains compared to losses associated with remote arrangements' forms of extensification. Those participants who felt that working from home was intentionally used as an excuse to increase workloads, did not consider a full return to the office was a desirable solution to unreasonable workloads.

## 4 | Discussion

This paper employed a moral economy framework to explore the evaluations of workers brought about by the unique historical context of lockdowns which forced an unprecedented

portion of the UK workforce to work from home and collectively experience forms of flexible work. We utilise the concept of *lay normativity* (Sayer 2000, 2005, 2011; Booth 1994) to showcase how the historical conjunction of lockdowns, against the background of widespread diversification, fragmentation, intensification and extensification of work, facilitated new areas of moral evaluation. These reflective evaluations forged a new sentiment around tertiary time devoted to 'preparing-for-work' labour and the potential flexibility perceived in hybrid work for the future.

We argue that the unique experience of remote work during the pandemic offered workers clarity over a particular type of work extensification they are subject to when working onsite. We develop the concept of tertiary time from the extensification of work literature (Standing 2013; Howcroft and Taylor 2024; Jarvis and Pratt 2006) to refer to this labour as unpaid preparatory work. We argue that hybrid work can be seen by workers as an opportunity that allows them take back some control over this area of tertiary time and by association some control over a form of work extensification. We show how they became conscious of this possibility during the pandemic and gained clarity over the 'preparing-for-work' labour as unfairly burdening their nonwork time. In anything but the name, our participants critically evaluate the 'preparing-for-work' labour, that is, the time, effort and energy they put into commuting and a range of preparatory tasks. Ironing clothes for the workweek preparing lunches, dressing for work, hair styling and putting make up on are described as taking up a significant part of workers' time and energy, whilst they are seen as uncompensated and, with the newly experienced potential for remote working, unnecessary.

Self-consciousness is 'sharpened by loss' (Thompson 1967, 407) and while much greater forms of loss struck many people and families during the pandemic, there were also the everyday losses of familiar working patterns and expectations for those workers forced to suddenly work from home. The total dependence of workers on their employer to define the locus and time of work is re-evaluated as disrupting social relations and a barrier to wellbeing. Similar to workers in Egypt who felt entitled to improved working conditions when they were taken away (Posusney 1993) and coalmine workers' longstanding expectation of job security and joint regulation in Scotland (Perchard and Phillips 2011; Phillips 2013), many of the UK workers we interviewed could no longer imagine their future without some form of flexible work arrangements. This observation is significant because scholarly work showcasing the challenges of flexible work, often only passing mention the fact that employees nonetheless desire and feel entitled to flexible work arrangements. Engagement with the concept of lay normativity and its focus on non-market-like priorities including human flourishing and suffering allows us to better understand why people are emotionally invested in hybrid and flexible work despite its drawbacks.

Our findings also show that the tertiary time gains are (partly or in whole) returned to the employer by some of our participants as unpaid overtime. This may appear as a paradox or a tension within flexible work, where more freedom over the locus and time of work leads employees to extenuating work effort and 'self-exploitation' (Chung 2022) or where flexible work is

instrumentalised by employers in non-standard employment (Moore et al. 2018). Nonetheless, even where our participants highlight concerns about additional work, they value the new-found increased control over their work time because it also opens up the opportunity to channel the tertiary time gains in their family or wellbeing. Our participants, thus, do not relate hybrid work to flexibility as in expanding atypical employment or work effort but compare it to working onsite fulltime and in *ceteris paribus* terms: seeing en masse desk-based workers not returning to onsite work fulltime is seen not just in positive terms but as an entitlement.

It is tempting to dismiss this positivity as naïve or self-harming. The risks that flexible work poses are significant and must be countervailed (e.g., through regulation such as the 'right to disconnect') to ensure workers are not exposed to unrestrained managerial authority (Nolan 2018). Yet, we feel it is important to be attentive to workers' recent reflections of their flexible work experiences. Against the background of exhausting their time between market and non-market labour, workers find the opportunity to repurpose some of the 'preparing-for-work' tertiary labour time beneficial and fair. In relation to fairness, considerable research is currently being carried out trying to establish whether hybrid work extenuates occupational, hierarchy biases and diversity gaps. Recent studies analysing large longitudinal data sets, for example, show convergence between gender wages under flexible work conditions in Germany and Australia (Maraziotis 2024; Birch and Preston 2025).

There is also a very real possibility that any ground that our participants feel they have gained may be lost over time. The sentiments presented in our analysis reflect a period shortly after hybrid working in response to lockdown and any negative experiences of flexible work may become more prominent in their evaluations over time. Further, there are recent precedents of large-scale socio-economic changes appearing to cause significant changes and working practices that then fail to materialise. For example, the UK's Workplace Employment Relations Study found that, while most workplaces faced immediate effects from the 2008 financial crisis and recession, longer-term impacts on employment relations were rather modest and often confined to particular workplaces. Overall, despite the scale of the impact on the economy and fears of catastrophe and the recreation of social institutions as a result, trends in practice indicated continuity as opposed to discontinuity (Van Wanrooy et al. 2011; Heery 2014; Kelly 2014). An exhaustive study of this data concluded that 'overall, employment relations institutions and practices are not very different in 2011 than they were in 2004' (Van Wanrooy et al. 2013, 192).

How the longer-term impacts will play out in terms of hybrid working remains to be seen, but many of our participants articulated clearly and passionately that they wanted to see change. We argue that a moral economy perspective is particularly helpful in understanding workers' sentiments against the mandate to return to the office fulltime, which they see as unfair. We employ a moral economy framework to conceptualise workers' time and the opportunity for rest and leisure as social goods and in particular diminished social goods. Moral economy sheds light on instances where people react to market pressures threatening

a social good, such as entitlements to basic goods (such as staples), customs (such as taverns, fairs or 'rough music'), or working conditions (such as job security, hours of work, the right to unions) (Thompson 1963, 1967, 1971). We note that moral economy approaches situate lay sentiments around social goods, economic practices and customs within their historical material context (Kirk 2023). Moral economy encompassing ethics of care approaches (Sayer 2011) inform our conceptualisation of rest and leisure as trivial in our contemporary market society. In market societies like the UK, work intensification and extensification squeezes workers' opportunity for rest and leisure, and it does so against the background of social routines and divisions which skew working people's ability for rest and leisure to the detriment of disadvantaged groups (such as class—the working poor—and gender) in the context of more general trends of diversification and fragmentation in working time, particular forms of tertiary time devoted to fulfilling employment obligations through unpaid activities may come to be opened to normative and moral evaluations (such that they come to be seen as unfair or exploitative).

The moral economy approach's emphasis on the lay *sense of fairness* and changing *consciousness* helps us shed light on why workers came to share a new sentiment around not only areas of tertiary time committed to serving the needs of paid employment but also the potential available in flexible work. Sayer (2000, 80) explains that the moral economy embodies sentiments and norms which 'go beyond matters of justice and equality, to conceptions of the good, for example regarding needs and the ends of economic activity'. A contribution of our research lays in the documentation of the shaping of a new sentiment among UK workers whose job, or parts of their job, can be performed remotely. Flexible work has for long been a key component in scholarly discussions and policies on job quality and fair work (Findlay and Thompson 2017). Despite academic and policymakers' calls for meaningful action to promote job quality in the world of work (e.g., Warhurst and Knox 2022), however, hybrid work, alongside other forms of flexible work, remained until recently a marginal work practice. Going beyond scholars' and policymakers' calls, our study documents loud and clear workers' common sentiment around the desirability of flexible work. Finally, most of our participants have no illusion of having the upper hand in determining their hybrid work arrangements. They allude to the consultative character of workplace surveys and admit that hybrid work policies are being decided by upper management, which may hear but not listen to employee voice (Skountridaki et al. 2024). In wider public debate, there have been loud voices calling for a 'return to work' and installing mandatory times to be in the workplace, sometimes in very emotive terms (e.g., Google AI's Sergey Brin or Donald Trump see Ma 2025). Currently, many large UK employers, including the public sector, have rather modest office presence requirements of 40%–60% of working time for desk-based jobs. Some employers, such as Lloyds, linked their 40% office-presence mandate to senior staff bonuses (Makortoff 2025), yet the extent to which employees are fulfilling the requirement is not certain. Companies with a strict return to the office mandate may also see delays in the rollout of the mandate. Amazon found out, for example, that it was hard to accommodate all staff back to the office and roll out the mandate in all its premises (Young 2024). Whilst many workers

find themselves with limited negotiating power over the locus of work, however, they are also morally confident in their desire to maintain flexibility. Similar to previous moral economy studies accounting for workers' reaction to the downgrading of their working conditions (e.g., Posusney 1993; Orlove 1997; Perchard and Phillips 2011; or Scott 1976 seminal work), our participants talk about hybrid work as a progressive working practice. Our analysis highlights workers' sentiments of having earned the right to work hybrid.

## 5 | Conclusion

Despite the tensions between employers and employees on the nature and extent of hybrid work, it has become a widespread practice in the UK over the past 3 years and since our interviews (Office for National Statistics 2024b). The gap between employee expectations and employer's increasing insistence on mandating a minimum number of days in the office, which most often exceeds employee preferences, is the main cause of tensions (Partridge 2024; Strauss 2024). Our research, with a particular focus on one area of tertiary time and work extensification, 'preparing for work' labour, has highlighted the evaluations of common working practices of workers suddenly working remotely as a result of the COVID pandemic. These evaluations, focused on what matters to these workers, have demonstrated the strength of feeling around what now constitutes fairness in these workplaces practices and the importance accorded to potential new forms of flexibility. We believe this indicates a shift in lay normativity (Sayer 2007) with powerful long-term consequences.

Theoretically, our contribution is in developing conceptions of lay normativity from moral economy to understand the scale and potential significance of the unprecedented implementation of hybrid working in response to COVID-19 lockdowns. We draw from a moral economy perspective that emphasises how 'Moral sentiments and arguments regarding economic activity, rights and responsibilities, continue to affect advanced capitalist societies' (Sayer 2011, 99). We utilise this framework to extend conceptualisations of tertiary time. The evaluation of tertiary time, as evidenced by our participants and conceived of from a moral economy perspective, is not the product of *homo economicus* but evaluated in terms of a range of roles and responsibilities and by people with 'personal needs and emotional connections' (Elder-Vass 2022, 98). It is this basis that causes such strongly felt and articulated sentiments in support of tertiary time gains expressed by our participants.

In terms of practice, we emphasise an important element in the ongoing contestation over rights and responsibilities involved in hybrid working with our focus on tertiary time. Hybrid work is not solely about where and when work is conducted. Those workers thrown into an experiment with remote working as a result of COVID-19 saw significant benefits that made them question some of the taken-for-granted assumptions around travel to and preparation for work. Our analysis has demonstrated the strength of their sentiments regarding the benefits but also the fairness of reducing the expenditure of tertiary time. However, it also demonstrates one of the areas where the contested nature of such practices is playing out—the extension



of the working day such that some of the gains received by reducing tertiary time are lost to unpaid overtime. Interestingly, at the time we conducted our study, many participants nonetheless saw the benefits as outweighing the negatives.

Developing from this, we suggest for policy there is a need to engage with developing attitudes towards tertiary time and hybrid working more generally. The 2024 expansion of the right to request flexible work from the first day of work in the UK is, on the basis of our findings, a measure in the right direction. There is also a need to prevent overwork through interventions such as the 'right to switch off' and to attempt to bring a measure of realism to the sometimes hyperbolic claims about the impacts on businesses of employees spending some of their working time working remotely. This is likely to be an issue that plays out for many years to come and our findings demonstrate the importance of understanding shifting attitudes of workers and their expectations and sense of fairness. Giving voice to such sentiments can provide an important counterbalance to accusations that hybrid workers are unproductive or demoralising to the wider workforce (Ma 2025).

Future research needs to focus on how the tensions will unfold and affect employment relations. Factors which are likely to shape employment relation developments in relation to flexible work include workers' determination on shaping their hybrid work patterns through daily resistance to employer mandates, the role the unions may play if they assume responsibility and include in their agendas action to protect employees' right to work offsite and the coordination among employers in taking back control over the locus of work by linking office presence to staff evaluation, performance management and career opportunities. Mutual reciprocity and solidarities among workers, which are at the heart of the moral economy theory of work, are also likely to play a significant role in how workers defend their entitlement to hybrid work and in enabling them to buffer power asymmetries in the employment relation. Whilst our data were collected too early to explore such daily acts of resistance and mutual support, future research should explore the impact on the horizontal relationships at work and the wider mechanisms at play that the hybrid entitlement is encapsulating. Power dynamics are also likely to extenuate inequalities in the labour market. Whilst a wide range of low-skilled desk-based jobs afford hybrid arrangements, future research must examine how the hierarchy bias develops. All these factors are currently at play, and it remains to be seen which will countervail the others and under what circumstances. Employees' recent entitlement to choosing the locus of work, whilst emotionally invested in, is always prone to contestation under the current employment relation dynamics and a conjunction of unfavourable labour market conditions.

## Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the UK Research and Innovation Funding (Grant Number ES/V003976/2).

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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