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DOI:
10.1080/13676261.2017.1421749

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Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Antonucci, L 2018, 'Not all experiences of precarious work lead to precarity: the case study of young people at university and their welfare mixes', *Journal of Youth Studies*, pp. 1-17.
https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1421749

Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal

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Not all experiences of precarious work lead to precarity: the case study of young people at university and their welfare mixes

The concept of precarity has gained momentum and challenges social scientists to consider the effects of labour-market insecurity across classes and welfare arrangements. This article discusses the varieties of experiences of precarious work by young people in university and identifies in which cases they are also experiences precarity. It is one of the first studies of its kind to investigate the material triggers of inequality by comparing young people's experiences across countries (England, Italy and Sweden) and by looking at the welfare mixes available to young people who are working at university. Through a comparative qualitative research involving young people from different socio-economic backgrounds and 'welfare mixes', the article shows that experiences of precarity concern a minority of young people who have an absolute necessity to rely on labour-market sources, due to the lack or insufficiency of state support and family sources. It also identifies: a group of young people who feel pressure to get precarious jobs to fill a decline in family resources; and a convenient use of precarious jobs suiting the circumstances of young people with abundant family resources. Overall, the research found that precarity is deeply connected to young people's welfare mixes.

Keywords: precarity, inequality, welfare, family, higher education, class

Word-count: 7998

Introduction

Since Guy Standing claimed that 'youth make up the core of the precariat' (Standing, 2011: 66), youth scholars have started to ask whether precarity is a common feature of contemporary youth (MacDonald, 2016; Woodman and Wyn, 2014). An issue that remains unanswered, and that this article tackles, is whether all young people in

precarious work experience precarity[1]. While precarious work refers to waged work exhibiting several dimensions of precariousness (see Vosko, 2009), precarity refers specifically to the detrimental effect of labour-market insecurity on people's lives (Campbell and Price, 2016; Kalleberg, 2011).

This article focuses on the specific case of young people at university. The rise of the student labour market – which, surprisingly, has been ignored by social researchers (Doogan, 2009: 161) – is linked to the effects of welfare-state transformations on young people's lives. Furthermore, though the combination of precarious work with studying full-time could be considered opportunistic, students are not always able to exercise preferences as to when and when not to work (Purcell and Elias, 2010). The case study of young people at university is therefore conceptually relevant, as it could suit young people's circumstances or stem from necessity. Experiences of young people at university are by definition transitional. Nevertheless, this is a crucial case study to analyse due to the reproduction of inequality taking place during this phase (Antonucci, 2016; Bathmaker et al., 2016).

This article proposes an original comparative qualitative methodology which contrasts young people's experiences of precarity across countries and across socio-economic backgrounds. The article offers an innovative perspective compared to the traditional focus on cultural triggers of inequality employed in the field (see Bathmaker, 2016; Reay et al., 2010). Indeed, it is one of the first studies of its kind to clarify the

[1] While this article does not cover the politics of 'the precariat', Standing considers a shared sense of precarity to be the pre-condition for the formation of the precariat as a new 'class-in-the-making' (Standing, 2011: 7).

material triggers of inequality in young people's experiences of precarity by looking at the welfare mixes available to young people who are working while at university.

The article is structured in the following way. First, it examines the precarity debate in youth studies and proposes the analysis of welfare mixes as a framework to understand the connection between experiences of precarious work and precarity. It then offers a comparative analysis of student support policies across the three countries. After presenting the methodology, the article covers two sections of findings: a discussion of the necessity of relying on the labour market in relation to welfare mixes, and an analysis of the link between individual welfare mixes and the experiences of precarious work. The article concludes that precarity is not purely the consequence of a wide diffusion of precarious jobs among young people, but emerges when precarious work is coupled with a lack of state and family sources in young people's 'welfare mix'.

The current puzzle that precarity has posed to youth studies

Following the severe impact the economic crisis had on young Europeans, the notion of 'precarity' – in particular in Standing's (2011) version – has gathered momentum and has been frequently used in academia (Woodman, 2012; MacDonald, 2011). Accounts of precarious labour-market participation by young people are certainly not new in the field of youth studies. The recent academic use of precarity hints, however, at something different: as a result of the crisis, it is no longer just the traditional category of 'socially excluded' young people who are employed in precarious jobs,

but also educated young people, such as graduates and university students (MacDonald, 2011).

While a part of youth scholarship considers ‘precarity’ to be a defining feature of the new social generation of young people (Woodman and Wyn, 2014), we are yet to understand if all young people experience precarious work in the same way. This puzzle is usefully summarised by MacDonald’s (2011) question: is precarity really an experience that spans the current youth generation, or, conversely, is it an experience that continues to reflect old social divisions, such as social class?

In order to answer this question, we need to distinguish and clarify the different elements of precariousness (see Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013). A first element is precarious work, defined as waged work exhibiting several dimensions of precariousness – therefore, jobs which are often, though not always, non-standard jobs (Vosko et al., 2009: 7–9). This paper employs Vosko’s (2010: 2) definition of precarious work as a job which displays at least two out of these four dimensions (2010: 2): a lack of regulatory protection; low wages; high employment insecurity; and low levels of employee control over wages, hours and working conditions. Precarity is a much broader concept and refers to ‘a generalised set of social conditions and an associated sense of insecurity, experienced by precarious workers but extending to other domains of social life’ (Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013: 299). Therefore, a pending issue for youth scholars is clarifying if in all instances ‘precarious work determines precarious living conditions and has knock-on effects on all the dimensions of life’ (Lodovici and Semenza, 2012: 14).

Precarious work at university and the welfare mixes

While Standing's (2011) work describes precarity as a generalised and ineluctable process in contemporary capitalism, Doogan (2009) highlights the extent to which the transformation of work is linked to deliberate welfare-state restructuring. Transferring the costs of higher education from the state to young people and their families has normalised the experience of 'earning and learning' (Doogan, 2009). As a reflection of this privatisation of higher-education costs, labour-market sources, while varying across countries, provide, on average, 30% of the monthly income of students according to undergraduate studies across EU countries (Eurostudent 2011: 119). In 2009, according to Eurostat (2009), 29% of young people (18–24) in education in the EU-27 had some form of job.

Importantly, different institutional solutions have been found in terms of the balance between state and private contributions across Europe (Doogan, 2009), and they directly affect the welfare mixes available to young people. According to Standing, 'of course there were institutional differences, but similar trends [of precarity] occurred in every country' (2014a: 2). Standing's (2011) assumption that all forms of precarious work lead to precarity overlooks the connection between young people's need to rely on work and the availability of other welfare sources, such as family support and state provisions (Antonucci et al., 2014). Sharing Standing's (2014a) concerns on the static nature of welfare-regime analysis, I propose to look instead at the welfare mixes, defined as the individual availability of family, state and labour-market sources (Powell and Barrientos, 2005). The first comparative studies on precarity confirm that due to the variations in the general levels of welfare and standards of living, being in precarious work across countries results in different types

of precarity (Melin and Blom, 2015). The analysis has to clarify the availability of different 'welfare mixes' to young people – namely how they combine the welfare sources in the labour market with those from the state and the family (Antonucci et al., 2014)[2].

Precarious work, welfare sources and the reproduction of inequality

The analysis of the variation of welfare mixes described above also clarifies the dynamics of inequality within youth. The mix between the available sources from the family, state and labour market is a crucial factor in explaining the current processes of stratification among young people (Antonucci et al., 2014; Rek-Wozniak, 2014). Exploring precarity among young people means considering that they are 'at the crossroads of the process of social reproduction' (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006: 139) – namely, in that crucial moment when they could find themselves entrenched in the same material structures that were available to their parents. Young people's social class needs therefore to be understood as 'work-in-progress', determined partly by their own participation in the labour market and partly by their background. Such a dynamic of stratification, in addition to young people's own participation in the labour market, is crucially influenced by the availability of family and state support.

Looking at young people's welfare mixes permits an exploration of such dynamics of social reproduction. As Standing himself admits, one of the very first reasons why young people need to rely on precarious jobs is to offset the declining socio-economic position of their parents (see Standing, 2011: 67). In addition, a scarcity of family

[2] Welfare refers to more than just financial resources and includes indirect support through housing, gifts and any indirect form of private provision.

support contributes to making the consequences of labour-market insecurity much harsher for a portion of young people (see Gentile, 2014; Maestripieri and Sabatinelli, 2014). Family support could also potentially smooth young people's experiences of precarious jobs. Similarly, the role of welfare-state provisions in limiting or reproducing precarity has been largely overlooked in youth studies (Antonucci et al., 2014; Rek-Wozniak, 2014).

It has been contended that 'working class' and 'middle class' young people might both take up precarious jobs, but they might experience different degrees of disadvantage depending on their class (MacDonald, 2016). The cultural understanding of class, which sharply divides young people into 'working' and 'middle' classes (see Bathmaker et al., 2016; Reay et al., 2010), misses crucial dynamics in the reproduction of inequality among young people. If we consider the 'welfare mixes', there are two processes involved in the reproduction of inequality which tend to be erroneously conflated by the cultural classification. The first process is a reconfiguration of the positions of the intermediate classes, the so-called squeezed middle, or families of ordinary workers, whose cost of living is increasing while the value of wages decreases (Parker, 2013). Young people from this squeezed middle might therefore rely on precarious jobs to compensate for the pressure on, and the decrease in, family resources. The second process in place (which is neglected by the narratives of precarity as a feature of the 'social generation') is the increasing pool of family resources available to young people from upper socio-economic backgrounds. Intra-generational inequality amongst young people must be explored looking at young people from lower, intermediate and upper socio-economic backgrounds.

‘Welfare mixes’, young people at university and precarity: comparing England, Italy and Sweden

Young people’s participation in work during higher education is linked, as argued earlier, to the trend towards the privatisation of the cost of higher education. The empirical part of this research has been conducted in three countries which represent the three ‘most different’ types of welfare-state intervention available to young people at university (Pechar and Andres, 2011; Willemse and De Beer, 2012). For the purpose of this article, I focus on student support policies, which influence the need to work across countries. I also briefly look at how ‘precarious jobs’ have become more diffused among university students.

In England, since the 1990s, young people and their families have been feeling increasing pressure to fund the costs of higher education, in terms of both fees and related living costs (Schwarz and Rehburg, 2004). In the English system there are high levels of both public and private spending (Willemse and De Beer, 2012): fees are comparatively high, but this has been offset by the availability of means-tested grants and loans. The reforms implemented in recent years have substantially increased the costs that have to be met by students and their families (Barr, 2012). The White Paper and the Comprehensive Review in 2010 abolished the cap on tuition fees, changed the parameters of loans and tightened the eligibility criteria for accessing grants (McGettigan, 2013). While the empirical part of this research was conducted before the latest reforms, this trend has continued with the abolition of grants as of September 2016 (UK Parliament, 2015). In this context, young people are increasingly having to work while at university, but even so they are not managing to

sustain their income. Student income from paid work fell by 37% in real terms, not because students are working less (on the contrary, students seem to be working more), but due to 'a change in the quality and duration of job opportunities' (BIS, 2013: 337). Data report that more students are working in casual jobs and that the pay of these jobs is falling in real terms (BIS, 2013: 337). Most recently, students have also featured among the category of people more likely to use zero-hours contracts (ONS, 2016).

In Italy, state support for young people at university has traditionally been scarce, with families intervening to fill the gap (Schwarz and Rehburg, 2004). State support covers only a minority of students at university, but fees are relatively low (Pechar and Andres, 2011; Willemse and De Beer, 2012). The system of student support in Italy is so underfunded that an increasing portion of students who are eligible for support are not receiving it due to a lack of regional funding (Prato, 2006). Those students who are 'eligible, but not beneficiaries', and who are exempt from having to pay fees, are more likely to be in Southern Italy (ibid.). State support has been further reduced by the so-called Riforma Gelmini (Antonucci 2011) and the most recent cuts to the welfare state that occurred during the Monti government (L. 7 Agosto 2012 n.135, 2012). Accompanying this trend, there has been an increase in precarious work among students, who are often employed on illegal contracts (see Di Nicola et al., 2014). The Italian equivalent of zero-hours contracts among students is 'job vouchers', namely pre-paid vouchers (widely used by working students) that can be cashed by workers after their daily work (INPS, 2015).

Sweden enjoys higher state intervention to meet the costs of university (with a policy

of no tuition fees) and offers quasi-universal state support (Schwarz and Rehburg, 2004). This state support is provided via grants and loans, although only for nine months of the year (Pechar and Andres, 2011; Willemse and De Beer, 2012), making participation in the labour market crucial during the summer break. Comparative studies on support for students consider the Swedish system to be relatively generous (Furlong and Cartmel, 2009). Since 2001, however, Swedish students have pointed out consistently that state support, from both grants and loans, has been less and less able to cover their expenses (CSN, 2012). Among those students who receive grants and loans, only 34% find that the support covers all their living expenses, leading them to look for other sources of income (from family or the labour market). This makes the student population 'on average more economically vulnerable than the general population' (CSN, 2012: 5), not least because of the increasing diffusion of precarious work in the country (Jonsson and Nyberg, 2009).

Sampling and methods: capturing socio-economic diversity

The previous sections have argued that, in order to clarify the relationship between being in precarious work and experiencing precarity, research needs to look at how young people's welfare mixes influence their experiences. To provide evidence for these arguments, the paper investigated young people (between 21 and 27) enrolled full-time at university for undergraduate studies in England, Italy and Sweden. I will present the main findings from 33 qualitative face-to-face interviews (11 per country). Interviews followed up a survey conducted with 84 young people which collected preliminary material on participants' backgrounds and welfare mixes. This study is part of an extensive research, *Student Lives in Crisis*, which mixed q-methodology

with qualitative interviews (blinded citation).

The assessment of socio-economic background has been conducted by merging the information on the occupational position and educational background of the respondents' parents, as per the following table. Occupational background refers to the parents' occupational position according to the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-88) (ILO, 2004), aggregated in three categories: routine and manual; intermediate; managerial and professional. Educational background refers to the highest educational attainment of students' parents aggregated into three broader categories: elementary education (corresponding to ISCED 0–2), secondary education (corresponding to ISCED 2–4) and university education (corresponding to ISCED 5–6) (UNESCO, 2014). In the event of a discrepancy between the mother's and the father's socio-economic backgrounds, the nomenclature has combined this discrepancy (e.g. 'lower intermediate').

[Insert Table 1 here]

The research followed the following strategic sampling criteria for the initial sample of 84 participants to avoid potential biases affecting the findings: gender balance (a minimum of 10 female and male participants for each country); having young people studying from at least two educational fields (among five educational areas explored in the survey[3]); and having a minimum of five participants from each socio-economic background in each country. I firstly liaised with lecturers and unions to find the initial 84 participants who completed the online survey. In order to have a variety of

[3] They are: Medicine and Dentistry and allied to health; Other sciences, engineering, technology and IT; Social sciences; Creative arts, humanities and languages; Education and Other.

young people from different backgrounds, the research took into account the institutional stratification in each country, namely the fact that certain institutions might have a higher representation of students from a certain socio-economic background. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to be substantially less well represented in old English universities (Furlong and Cartmel, 2009). In order to capture the institutional and geographical diversity, I recruited participants at the University of Bristol (an old university), Teesside University and the University of the West of England (new universities, in the north and south respectively). A similar divide is present between Swedish former technical universities (*högskola*) and historical academic universities (Jonsson and Erikson, 2011). In order to capture this, I recruited participants at Lund University (a historical university) and Malmö University (a *högskola*). In order to capture the north–south divide in the Italian system (Bratti et al., 2008), I recruited participants in Milan (Università Statale di Milano, Università Cattolica, Università Bocconi) and Naples (Università Federico II, Università Orientale).

The strategic sampling has been implemented in an adaptive way: during the completion of the surveys, I monitored the gender balance between the participants, their socio-economic backgrounds and their fields of study. When necessary, I redirected my recruitment strategy to improve the variability. For example, I arranged for more presentations with lecturers from certain fields of study who were not originally represented, or I focused on recruiting students from a certain institution/area where I was lacking young people from certain socio-economic backgrounds. A minimum of five participants from each socio-economic background in each country completed the survey.

Follow-up interviews were conducted with 33 participants (11 per country) in the three countries and the six cities[4]. The selection of the 11 participants was informed by the same sampling criteria used for the survey: gender balance; educational field; and a minimum of three participants from each socio-economic background. Despite the moderate level of attrition due to the time that elapsed between the survey and the in-depth interviews, the final sample fulfilled all the above-mentioned criteria.

The analysis of the material has been conducted in two steps. First, I employed theoretical coding around the key concepts of the study: 'welfare mixes' (distinguishing between family, labour market and state sources), 'socio-economic background' and 'young people's experiences at university'. The interpretation has been also facilitated by the collection of the contextual information in the survey. Secondly, I used an inductive-orientated coding procedure identifying themes which have not been specified a priori but have only emerged during the interviews, in order to allow themes to emerge in a 'bottom-up' fashion. The material has been analysed by employing a 'welfare analysis' which assessed how young people's experiences of the labour market are linked to the other welfare sources available (from the family and the state). The excerpts from the interviews presented below have been selected for their theoretical relevance in clarifying the role of welfare mixes (the interaction between labour-market, state and family sources).

Without making any claim of representativeness, out of the 84 students who joined the study, the majority (46) were working while studying and were employed in 'precarious jobs' (using Vosko's definition above (2010: 2)); 34 students (22 of whom

[4] The research received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the School for Policy Studies (University of Bristol). In line with the policy of confidentiality, participants' original names have been replaced with invented names and only 'type of institution attended' are reported.

were from Italy) were not working; and 4 of them were in full-time positions. The issue here was whether they all experienced precarity.

'Welfare mixes' and the necessity of relying on the labour market

This section discusses the links between the welfare mixes available in the three countries and the need to take up precarious jobs. Using welfare analysis, it clarifies how the welfare mixes available in each country influence the need to rely on precarious jobs.

England: working to supplement the lack of family support

As illustrated above, state support in England is means-tested and assumes a contribution from young people and their families. A fundamental driver for young people to work while at university in England is the lack of family support (confirming what was found by Forsyth and Furlong, 2003), as well as the insufficiency of state support. This was the case for David, an English student from a lower-intermediate socio-economic background, who received both the full grant (which was offered at the time of the interview) and student loan and did not receive any family support. With state support insufficient to meet his needs, David was working on a freelance contract as an IT programmer during the summer. This seasonal job presented at least three features of Vosko's (2010) definition of a precarious job (namely the lack of regulatory protection, high employment insecurity

and low levels of control over wages and hours). This work allowed him to accumulate enough financial resources to cover his costs for the academic year:

> If I didn't take work in the summer I wouldn't have any money to spend on myself. It's just the living costs that I can cover with the loan.
>
> (David, England, old university, computer sciences, lower-intermediate socio-economic background)

David's words stress how his labour-market participation was linked to the available welfare mix and in particular to the necessity of acquiring additional resources due to the absence of family support *and* the insufficient state support. I also found young people from intermediate backgrounds who expressed a need to supplement state support by taking jobs because of a mismatch between what the state assumed the family could afford and what the family was in fact able to provide. This was the case with Sharon, a student from an intermediate socio-economic background, who was working part-time in the retail sector. This was also a precarious job, as it was characterised by low wages and a lack of control over working conditions. Sharon's need to work was strictly linked to the lack of both state and family resources:

> I do not get any grant from the government, only a loan, which barely covers my accommodation fee. […] I think the government assumes, based on my parents' earnings, that they will give me money for food, etc., but they do not have spare money because they have a high mortgage and debts.
>
> (Sharon, England, old university, engineering, intermediate socio-economic background)

Sharon's experience resonates with the findings of the English Student Income and

Expenditure Study (BIS, 2013), which found a mismatch between the assumptions of the English student support system and the available family support. Overall, these findings indicate the consequences of the welfare mix available in England. The gap between the support from the family assumed by the state in England and the real support available to young people (from both the state and the family) constituted a key driver of the take-up of precarious jobs.

Italy: the need to work emerging from the lack of state and family support

In the case of Italy, where only a minority of students receive state support, working while attending university was seen as 'necessary' for those lacking family resources. The welfare mix available to participants in Italy relied heavily on family provisions, putting pressure on those who lacked this support. When Maria, from a lower socio-economic background, received her grant, this relieved the pressure on her family, who had taken on personal debt to support her studies:

> The first year that I had the grant I divided it between me and my dad. It was really great – being used to living with nothing, it was a big change.
>
> (Maria, Italy, southern university, humanities, lower socio-economic background)

In other years Maria was eligible, but did not receive state support due to a lack of regional funds. To fill this gap, Maria worked in several 'precarious jobs' (e.g. babysitting and tutoring), which presented all four aspects of precarious jobs

described by Vosko (2010). As those jobs were low paid, Maria needed to take on a number of different jobs – a solution which posed a dilemma:

> If I do not work I cannot finish university; if I work I cannot study. This is a contradiction and I haven't found out how to solve it.

Maria's experience, albeit extreme, highlights some core elements of the residual welfare mix available to young people at university in Italy. In this case, the combined lack of state provisions and family support makes it necessary for young people to engage in 'learning and earning' (Doogan, 2009).

Sweden: how state support (partially) limits the reliance on precarious jobs

As illustrated above, the Swedish system offers a relatively sufficient level of state support during the academic year, but expects young people to look for seasonal and/or temporary jobs during the summer. The presence of state support makes students, in some respects, less dependent on precarious jobs. The implications of a 'welfare mix' with a relatively higher level of state support are best explained by the experience of Saga, a Swedish student from a low socio-economic background, who was receiving the full grant and loan, and had no family support. Saga explained to me how state support during university was able to cover her main costs:

> The entrance to university has improved my economic situation: I now have the opportunity to save money. Before I just got a small amount of money but I had to use it so I could live well. But now I get a lot of money so I can save

it.

(Saga, Sweden, traditional university, social sciences, low socio-economic background)

When I asked Saga why she needed to save money, she explained that the availability of state sources protected her in case she was not able to find a seasonal job during the summer:

> The reason why I am saving money is that I am looking for jobs for the summer, but [I need to save] in case I do not find them, and, of course, sometimes you have unexpected expenses.

Not all young people are able to avoid working by saving money from the state support they receive, and most of them have to rely on additional labour support. Kasia, a Swedish student from a low socio-economic background, could not rely on family support either. Kasia received full state support (the full loan and grant) and was not able to save money from her state support due to high housing costs. When interviewed during the winter, Kasia told me:

> I am kind of anxious about this situation because I haven't really found anything for the summer yet and I really need to do that soon … I've applied for a few jobs so hopefully somebody will call back soon.

(Kasia, Sweden, *högskola*, social sciences, low socio-economic background)

The system of state support in Sweden seemed only partially able to prevent students from having to rely on precarious jobs throughout the whole year. Overall, the findings confirmed (as claimed in Cook and Furstenberg, 2002) that the need to rely on short-term jobs during the summer tends to disadvantage Swedish students with less family support. However, the relative generosity of state support in Sweden, and the subsequent significance of state support in the welfare mix, means that participants do not rely on these jobs as much as participants from the residual systems presented above.

Individual welfare mixes and experiences of precarious work

Having discussed how the need to rely on the labour market is linked to the variation in the welfare mixes available in the three countries, we can go a step further and identify different sociological meanings to having precarious jobs. This part also shows that, using the definition given above, only one experience of precarious work results in precarity.

When participation in precarious jobs becomes precarity

As discussed in the first part of this article, precarity refers to the sense of insecurity experienced by those in work, which reverberates through other domains of their lives (Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013; Kalleberg, 2011). During my research I found a small

section of young people working while at university who presented clear signs of the domino effect, described by Lodovici and Semenza (2012), of precarious work becoming precarity of living. This was the case for Mark, an English student from a lower-intermediate socio-economic background, who worked as a shop assistant on a zero-hours contract (namely a contract that does not guarantee a minimum number of hours). Working in this specific type of job (zero-hours contract) meant that Mark had unpredictable income (one of the defining features of Standing's precarity, 2011: 10): 'I earn so little. I am on a zero-hours contract so it's impossible for me to predict how much I am gonna earn' (Mark, England, engineering, new university, lower-intermediate socio-economic background). Mark's job was also precarious because, being a zero-hours contract, the position had a low level of employee control over wages and hours. The low level of control over hours resulted in a negative outcome in terms of the balance between work, study and other commitments: 'I only sleep six hours at night, I don't really have that much time [in between work and studying].'

The low control over wages also had profound implications for Mark's life. Mark told me that his standard of living had fallen substantially since starting at university as a result of his low wages. He described how he tried to minimise costs by changing his diet ('I am trying to eat a lot less meat. It's a lot cheaper if you eat vegetarian dishes') and by giving up healthy food ('you end up eating just some toast for the last days of the month').

I found a very similar negative effect of precarious employment on living when I interviewed David, an English student from a lower-intermediate background who lacked family support and for whom state support was not sufficient. David described the effects of the irregular income on his financial condition:

> [I wasn't paid for a month] towards the end of the month. I was like £996 below my £1000 overdraft and for a week I was like 'I don't have anything'. I lived off my 'nectar points' from my Sainsbury's card; you can buy food from your nectar points. That was the closest I've been to having nothing.
>
> (David, England, old university, computer science, lower-intermediate socio-economic background)

David's and Mark's experiences matched the experiences of a couple of students in Italy who relied on precarious jobs (namely jobs with both low wages and irregular income), lacked state and family support, and also displayed signs of precarity. Working was, for all these participants, an absolute necessity due to the lack of other welfare sources and the shape of student support described above.

Interestingly, this type of young people's experiences was not found in Sweden, as the specific welfare mix available in Sweden, as a result of higher state support, prevents precarious work from becoming an experience of precarity. This was, for example, the case for Sofia (engineering, *högskola*, low socio-economic background), who, during the summer, had a manual job in a paper factory. Sofia's job was precarious, as it involved both low wages and low levels of employee control over wages, hours and working conditions (Vosko, 2010). She relied on state support, and, as this was insufficient and she lacked family support, she accumulated financial resources from labour-market participation during the summer. Although Sofia lamented a general feeling of being financially limited and a lack of resources to cover any 'unexpected expenses', the presence of state support meant that labour-market participation did not become an experience of precarity.

Precarity was not the automatic consequence of precarious work, as implied by Standing (2011), but emerged as the combined effect of the participation in precarious work and the lack of sources from the family and the state. Participants experiencing precarity shared an insufficiency of state support (an institutional feature of the welfare mix available in England and Italy) coupled with an *individual* lack of family support.

Precarious jobs to supplement insufficient state and family sources

The experience of young people from the previous group stands in contrast to that of young people who can count on a moderate level of family support, but who need to work to limit their reliance on family support. This specific use of precarious work was common among participants from England and Italy, where, as mentioned before, young people have insufficient or absent state support (while, as I will discuss later, the reliance on family support is a feature of students from upper socio-economic backgrounds in Sweden). Due to this, they are increasingly assumed to have to rely on family support.

This case is best exemplified by the experience of Rebecca, an English student from an intermediate socio-economic background, who received support from her parents and took out state loans. Rebecca underlined that the state support was not enough to cover her education and living costs and that it had to be topped up by her family:

> I do not get enough money from the state to support my studies. My loan just

> about covers the extortionate rent that we're charged as students. Luckily my family has some expendable income with which to support me financially.
>
> (Rebecca, England, new university, humanities, intermediate background)

Rebecca worked as a waitress in the tourism sector during the summer. This seasonal job was precarious in two respects: high employment insecurity, and low levels of employee control over wages, hours and working conditions. Her strategy, quite common among young people at university, was to work during the summer in order to accumulate resources to be spent during the year and limit her reliance on the family:

> [In the summer] I worked quite a lot, I didn't have a lot of time to relax and have a break from things, it was full-on … like all the time. But on the other hand, I earned quite a lot of money, which helped me to get through the first term of the second year without much financial support from my parents.

Rebecca's experience is not purely the proof of a general diffusion of precarity, which is now also experienced by 'middle class' young people (as suggested by MacDonald, 2016). Rebecca's experience exemplifies the situation of young people from families of the 'squeezed middle' (see Parker, 2013), namely intermediate families who face a high cost of living as a consequence of the privatisation of state support in England described above. As Rebecca herself explained: 'If I got more support from the state it

would be easier on my parents. They'd rather be saving money for retirement, given that the pension is going downhill.'

The motivation among young people in this group to take on precarious jobs does not stem from an absolute necessity, as was the case for young people in the previous group. For this group of young people, while working is essential to ease the pressure on family sources and due to the lack of state support, being in precarious jobs does not translate into precarity of living.

Being in precarious jobs to gain extra income

Young people can also take on precarious jobs if they feel that this type of work suits their particular circumstances while at university. In all three countries of this study, I found young people from upper socio-economic backgrounds who tended to use family support, but attempted to engage in paid work to minimise their reliance on the family.

Giulia, an Italian student from an upper socio-economic background who worked casually as a photographer, exemplifies the case of young people who do not need to earn money in the labour market but who choose to work to cover extra expenditure:

> Sometimes I try to do photography, but I am not well paid, it's not regular, it's for extra. Sometimes I do tutoring. It's not a necessity, it's because I wanted to do it and I am lucky enough to come from a family that has the resources.

(Giulia, Italy, southern university, social sciences, upper socio-economic background)

Giulia's jobs were also precarious, as they presented a lack of regulatory protection, low wages and high employment insecurity. Her life was not, however, affected by her participation in precarious work.

Tilde from Sweden, also from an upper socio-economic background, had a similar approach, using precarious jobs as a way to meet any extra expenses and to complement both the universal state support and support from her family. Tilde's part-time work in a call centre displayed all four conditions of Vosko's (2010) definition of precarious work. When I asked Tilde about her reasons for taking up this job, she explained that it was a way to cover her extra expenses and fund her desire to travel:

> I like travelling. Sometimes I want to do something that's nicer, and then you need a bit more money to save up for that because the money I have now, I feel that covers a life in Malmö that's pretty OK, but not if I want to go to Stockholm.
>
> (Tilde, Sweden, *högskola*, social sciences, upper socio-economic background)

Giulia's and Tilde's motivation for working stemmed from an attempt to be more independent from their family. However, it was the family that – by sustaining their

living standards – kept them out of precarity. In the words of Tilde:

> I want to be independent and I don't want to be like, 'Daddy, I need money.' But obviously if I need money, they'd give me money, and I have it better than other students.

In contrast with the first type of precarity described above, these young people who are in precarious jobs do not *need* to work, as they have access to family support. This means that they can also potentially 'afford' unpaid internships to improve their CVs for future transitions to the labour market (see Leonard et al., 2015), as some of my participants from upper socio-economic backgrounds did. In both Giulia's and Tilde's words, however, we can sense a desire to become more independent from family sources.

Conclusion: how and why precarious work divides

Several contributions in youth scholarship have suggested that Standing's notion of precarity (2011) could redefine the experiences of young people and even unify them (MacDonald, 2016; Woodman and Wyn, 2015). I wanted to explore this issue by looking at a specific case study where precarious work is widely diffused, which is the case of young people at university. I used the framework of the welfare mixes to clarify if all young people in precarious jobs (using Vosko, 2010) experienced precarity (as defined by Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013).

Only a section of my participants in precarious work experienced precarity. I found that the one trait explaining the experiences of precarity among young people was, even more than their socio-economic background, the specific welfare mix available, namely a lack of family resources coupled with a lack or insufficiency of state support. This occurred in England and Italy, where, due to the system of student support, participants heavily relied on private contributions (through work and their families). Rather than reflecting a transmission of inequality via cultural capital (see Reay et al., 2010), the dynamics of stratification described above derive from the unequal availability of welfare mixes to young people – an element which is connected to young people's individual backgrounds, but not in a deterministic way. Indeed, the higher state support available to Swedish participants allowed them to partially offset the potential negative effects of precarious work. The research has also identified a group of young people who feel consistent pressure to get precarious jobs due to the gap between assumed family support and the actual sources available (young people from 'the squeezed middle'). It also found that precarious jobs suit the circumstances of certain young people with abundant family resources, who *choose* to work to limit their reliance on their family or to pay for extra expenses. These last two groups of young people were not, however, experiencing precarity.

Precarious jobs might be widely diffused among young people at university, but precarity is not an inevitable consequence of the diffusion of precarious jobs among young people, as argued by Standing (2011). The diffusion of precarity is, instead, deeply connected to the variegated effect of welfare-state restructuring on young people (in this respect, another venue for future research could concern the role of

labour market opportunities available in different countries in explaining unequal experiences of precarity).

This research questions the analytical relevance of placing all young people's experiences of precarious jobs under a single umbrella category of precarity, rather than exploring the structural factors that intervene to transform their experiences of precarious work into precarity. Participants' testimonies stress that their reliance on the labour market is used to offset the insufficiency and lack of state and family support. This gap inevitably reproduces existing social divisions among young people. In this context, the diffusion of precarious work divides, more than unites, young people's experiences.

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