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Precarious work among young Danish employees - a permanent or transitory condition?

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ABSTRACT

There is broad agreement that precarious work is a growing problem, and that it is highly prevalent among young employees. The financial crisis in 2008 has reinforced the need for knowledge about how precarious work affects young employees. This paper explores how the concept of precarious work may apply differentially to different groups of young people at work and whether this challenges the term 'transition', which until now has been one of the core elements within contemporary youth research. We examine discursive representations of precarious work, vulnerability and risks among young Danish employees aged 18–24 in the healthcare sector, the metal industry and retail trade captured in 46 interviews involving 74 participants. Results are discussed taking into consideration the Nordic welfare model with an active labour market policy. We conclude that precarious work is not, in fact, simply a characteristic of young employees' work as such, but rather it is related to their position in the labour market and the type of jobs in which they are employed. While some are in transition, others are at risk of being trapped in precarious and risky working conditions.

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Labour market; transitions;
precarious work;
vulnerability; risk

Background

The concepts precarious, precarious work and the Precariat (Standing 2011) have become increasingly important in explaining the transformations in the labour market, that we are currently experiencing (Casas-Cortés 2014). These concepts capture how current policies and economic conditions produce new forms of marginalization in the labour market. Central to these notions is an increased insecurity for people at work.

'Precarious' work is an ambiguous and relative concept representing several forms of uncertainty and vulnerability in the labour market; there are no agreed definitions of what precisely constitutes precarious employment (Quinlan, Mayhew, and Bohle 2001; Rasmussen and Håpnes 2012; Underhill and Quinlan 2011). MacDonald (2009) argues that there are important category differences within research on precarious work. While narrow definitions on 'precarious' employment tend to focus on its contractual status

(‘contingent’, ‘atypical’, ‘non-traditional’ work), wider definitions also refer to other dimensions, such as, limited social benefits, statutory entitlements and job insecurity (Keller and Seifert 2013). The label is also used in some circumstances to knowledge workers with higher educations (Casas-Cortés 2014; Gherardi and Murgia 2013; Rasmussen and Håpnes 2012).

In the book, ‘The Precariat – The new Dangerous Class’ (2011) Standing, argues that a new class of workers is emerging. Risks and insecurity are being transferred onto workers as a result of increasing labour market flexibility. According to Standing an increasing number of people around the world are working under extremely precarious working conditions. This applies to both uncertainties in the labour market and in employment characterized by flexible, unstable and short-term jobs without prospects for the future. These workers lack stable occupational identities, access to a future career, and social protection (Standing 2011, 10). The Precariat is not a homogeneous group. The label applies to various groups, such as teenagers who survive volatile jobs, migrant workers and single mothers (Standing 2011, 14).

However, this popularized concept does not differentiate clearly between various dimensions of precariousness and also fails to take various contextual factors into consideration (Keller and Seifert 2013), such as national welfare models, national labour market policies and other factors that could counter the negative effects of non-standard and uncertain working conditions, such as family background. Standing’s book deals with the globally exposed and includes many countries and continents, and his designation of who belongs to the precariat is not very accurate, and makes the use of the concept difficult in empirical studies. Also, Standings concept is very restrictive and categorical, and does not allow to distinguish between existing degrees of precariousness (Keller and Seifert 2013).

Despite the lack of a consensus on the concept of precarious work, there seems to be broad agreement that precariousness is a growing problem, and that it is highly prevalent among the young people (Hamilton, Antonucci, and Roberts 2014; ILO 2011; MacDonald 2009).

The volatility and uncertainty of work must be viewed in light of recent transformations of employment and the labour market (Casas-Cortés 2014; Gherardi and Murgia 2013; Hamilton, Antonucci, and Roberts 2014; Kalleberg 2009). Kalleberg (2009) addresses what he labels a ‘global neoliberal revolution’ emphasizing the centrality of markets and market-driven solutions, privatization of government resources, and removal of government protections (Kalleberg 2009, 3). He argues that precarious work in the United States began in the mid- to late-1970s as a consequence of the ‘macro-economic changes (such as the oil shock) that lead to an increase in global price competition’ (Kalleberg 2009, 2). Following this Scheuer (2011), argues, that the 1970s also made a turning point in relation to the Danish labour market. From this point regulation began to be seen as part of the reason for the rather high unemployment, and the policies went towards deregulation of the labour market (9).

Even precarious work has a longer history the financial crisis in 2008 further pushed this development and added new forms of insecurity and exclusions from the labour market that particularly affected young people (Furlong, Woodman, and Wyn 2011; Hamilton, Antonucci, and Roberts 2014; MacDonald 2009). Unemployment is now seen as a common feature of youth transitions to the labour market throughout Europe and

precarious employment may have spread from its traditional base amongst less educated, working class young people to better educated, middle class youth (MacDonald 2009). Furlong, Woodman, and Wyn (2011) argues that the *'end points in the process of becoming an adult are increasingly difficult to identify'*. This challenge the term 'transition' which until now has been at the heart of contemporary youth research (Furlong, Woodman, and Wyn 2011, 362). While Woodman and Wyn (2015) and MacDonald (2009) argues that across Western industrialized economies a 'new social generation' of young people are now defined by insecurity.

Gherardi and Murgia (2013) describe the current transformations as a shift from 'demand for 'masculine' full-time work in manufacturing companies to demand for 'feminine' part-time work in the service sector' (Gherardi and Murgia 2013, 1). They explain that these changes have occurred thanks to a growing service sector, an increasing demand for relational skills, and the diffusion of new technologies. But it is not just women who traditionally have been employed in part-time service jobs that require relational skills. Young people of both sexes have delivered this type of labour since the 1960s (Greenberger and Steinberg 1986). Thus, there are similarities between the nature of the flexible work which is being increasingly demanded, and the type of work that young people have traditionally delivered while studying. Young people are at special risk of falling into 'the precariousness trap' if uncertain and volatile work does not lead to more secure jobs (Duell 2004, 19). The trap involves being retained in precarious working conditions that young employees know from their study- and leisure time work - so that working under these conditions never ends. MacDonald (2009) and Roberts (2011) discusses the potential for precarious jobs to be stepping-stones into more secure jobs. Roberts (2011) argues that the respondents in his research seem to be victims of a *'Retail- trap'* (32). They get caught in a precarious situation in life because of their precarious work situation does not offer them the opportunity for professional development that could contribute to a further transition.

The reality is that the bulk of low-end jobs are dead end, with only a very small proportion of workers able to progress more than a single rung up the occupational ladder. (Roberts 2013, 284)

The type of work that has traditionally been the ultimate goal of youth life transition processes, i.e. a 'true' (skilled) full-time job, is challenged (Antonucci et al. 2014; Castel 2003; Clarke 2008; Furlong, Woodman, and Wyn 2011).

However, 'youth' is a broad category encompassing both young students with part-time jobs in retail, the newly qualified young graduates who may have multiple uncertain and volatile jobs before securing more permanent positions, and skilled young workers with managerial responsibilities in a permanent job (Nielsen et al. 2013). We share the concern of Hardgrove, McDowell, and Rootham (2015) who express, that researchers' concern for the marginalized may prioritize attention to those who are disaffected, disadvantaged, or disconnected from the 'mainstream'. Young people are far from being a homogeneous group. This paper explores how the concept of precarious work may apply differentially to different groups of young people in the labour market. More specifically, this paper addresses how uncertainty and risks in the labour market and at work are viewed by young Danish employees, and whether some groups of these young employees are particularly vulnerable to this development. This will be discussed taking into

consideration the Danish context building on the Nordic Welfare Model and an active labour market policy.

The Danish context of employment

The regulation of the labour market in Denmark consists of legislation and collective agreements and provides a framework for employee's working conditions and basic employment rights (Dyreborg 2011). The employment rights are set at a relatively high level compared to other European countries, and the coverage of the collective agreement is relatively high (Rasmussen, Refslund, and Sørensen 2015). Most categories of workers are entitled to basic protections, such as unemployment benefit, which includes those engaged on fixed term and agency contracts, with the exception of self-employed. The eligibility and entitlement of workers for unemployment benefits are contingent on hours worked and the contribution made to the unemployment insurance system.

In a Danish context Pedersen (2011) has shown how globalization and international competition between Western countries has led to significant changes of the Danish welfare state and of the policy pursued, including Danish Educational- and Labour market policy. He argues that the drivers of the profound changes of the Danish welfare state have been international competition. His concept 'The Competition State' (2011) addresses this argument and has been agenda setting in Denmark since his book was published.

The last 15 years' welfare reforms have reduced the extent of employment rights by introducing stricter requirements to be eligible for unemployment benefits and shorter periods for eligibility. This means that for some groups, such as fixed term contracts, part-time employees and temporary agency workers can face challenges in protection and in their eligibility for unemployment benefits. In particular for employees who work very short hours or agency workers who move between different temporary agencies more severe gaps exist in basic protection (Rasmussen, Refslund, and Sørensen 2015).

The change in Denmark to a marked 'active labour market policy', has led to increased activation obligations, stricter availability rules as well as sanctions for those who refuse to take part in activation activities. One of the central elements of this policy is that all young people under the age of 30 without formal qualifications must accept educationally directed training in order to continue to claim benefits (Görlich and Katznelson 2015; The Danish Ministry of Employment 2013).

In line with this there is a high degree of political awareness of young people's education and on the residual group who have not completed their formal education (Görlich and Katznelson 2015). Changing Danish governments have launched numerous political initiatives to get as many young people as possible into education, to achieve higher completion rates and to prevent students dropping out from upper secondary and tertiary school. Within the Educational policy, the Danish government has set the goal that at least 95% of all young people should complete upper secondary education (equivalent to minimum 12 years of schooling) by 2015 (Görlich and Katznelson 2015; Ministry of the State of Denmark 2011). It seems not to be an option that young people are not embarking on an education if they are not in employment (Pless 2014).

The organization of the Labour market system in Denmark can be described as a '*Flexicurity system*':

Security in any one job is relatively low, but labor market security is fairly high because unemployed workers are given a great deal of protection and help in finding new jobs (as well as income compensation, education, and job training). This “flexicurity” system combines “flexible hiring and firing rules for employers and a social security system for workers”. (Kalleberg 2009, 16)

But some argues that the ‘flexicurity system’ currently is changing towards more ‘flexi’ than being ‘secure’. Scheuer (2011) argues that the development of the Danish labour market during the past 10–20 years can be characterized by displacement of working life risk onto specific groups of employees with atypical (non-standard) employment contracts. These groups are no longer covered by the protection and rights that apply to ‘typical’ employment contracts (Scheuer 2011, 10). One tenth of the workforce is permanently kept outside of the security and the protection that applies to the majority of Danish employees. Young people under 30 are over-represented among workers with atypical employment (Scheuer 2011, 61). The extent of part-time work and non-permanent work is increasing in all of the Nordic countries, and in particular among young employees (Kines et al. 2013).

According to Eurostat (2015) the proportion of unemployed young people in Denmark under the age of 25 was 10.8% in January 2015, against 14.1% the year before, which is lower than the EU-28 unemployment rate of 23%. This difference might to some extent be explained by the Educational policy and the very active labour market policy in Denmark. For those young people, national context matters.

Method and analytical perspective

The paper draws on qualitative data from a long-term research project concerning working conditions among young Danish employees. The interviews were conducted in order to elucidate discursive representations of precariousness, the labour market situation and working conditions among young employees. In total 46 interviews were carried out including 74 participants, i.e. group interviews were also carried out. The interviews were carried out in two periods between June 2011 and December 2015 in 22 different workplaces (in healthcare, metal industry and retail) during working hours (Table 1). Additionally, ethnographic observations were carried out for eight participants (3–5

Table 1. Participant characteristics and number of interviews/group interviews.

	Retail trade	Social and health work	Metal work	All
No. of firms	11	6	5	22
No. interviews	30	9	7	46
No. of participants	34	14	26	74
Average age, participants	21	21	19	21
Percentage men	65%	14%	100%	65%
Percentage on part-time	32%	21%	0%	17%
Youth Categories covered	7 skilled sales assistants, 8 apprentices, 5 Sabbatical year student, 9 student employee, 4 early school leavers, 1 temporary agency worker.	2 skilled health assistants, 9 apprentices, 3 temporary agency workers	4 skilled metal workers, 21 apprentices, 1 early school leaver	

days during the first month of their employment). The main criteria for inclusion of all interviewees were being an employee between 18 and 24 years who was willing to talk about their work experiences and approaches to finding and keeping work.

We choose the three industries (healthcare, metal industry and retail) because they represent very different working cultures and working conditions for young employees. In the metal industry young employees (primarily men) work as apprentices or as skilled employees. In nursing homes young employees (primarily women) are employed as apprentices, skilled employees or as temporary employees. Both in the health care sector and the metal industry young employees under 25 often represent a minority in the workplace, while the retail sector traditionally has employed many young males and females (Greenberger and Steinberg 1986; Hendricks and Layne 1999; Tannock 2003). This is also the case in the Nordic countries (Esbjerg, Esbjerg, and Buck 2010; Nielsen et al. 2013; Rafnsdóttir 1999).

In the retail trade a large proportion (57%) of young people are employed part-time, and 61% of the young employees primarily work after 3 pm on weekdays and on weekends (Nielsen et al. 2014). In the metal industry, there is virtually no part-time work, and among social and health care employees there is no difference between young and older employees' share of part-time work. It is therefore particularly in retail, that part-time work is a youth phenomenon.

We sought to maximize the variation regarding age, job function, work and gender among those we interviewed. All participants were thoroughly informed about the research project. While the individual interviews focused on the interviewees' individual experiences of precariousness, their labour marked situation and working conditions, the aim of the group interviews was to contribute to knowledge on common norms and ideas about their labour market situations and working conditions. The introductory question was about how the young employee got the job, and this elicited responses concerning the general labour market situation, and for a number of them, the uncertain and volatile working conditions they have experienced. The interviews were transcribed verbatim with anonymity of the interviewees.

The analytical approach involved searching for discursive representations of job instability, volatility and future prospects on the labour market, as well as articulations of different forms of pressure and disorganization experienced in relation to work (Quinlan, Mayhew, and Bohle 2001). We began with the acknowledgement that young employees are a heterogeneous group where age alone does not adequately explain increased uncertainty, vulnerability and risk (Nielsen et al. 2013, 2014).

The construction of the youth categories

In order to capture the heterogeneity of young employees we have developed the following youth categories: 'Skilled employees', 'Apprentices', 'Sabbatical year employees', 'Student employees', 'Early School leavers' and 'Temporary agency worker.'

The construction of these categories is described in Nielsen et al. (2013) as an explorative, complex, and context-sensitive process. Developing the categories began while interviewing young employees in six different supermarkets (as described in Nielsen et al. 2013). Here we noticed that the group of young adult workers was highly diverse. As an example, we noticed that the employees in the supermarkets operated with a group of

employees that they termed ‘young workers.’ It was the employees under 18 years of age, working part-time after school. The rest of the group that we categorized as ‘young adult workers’ was not only seen as young employees, according to their age, but grouped according to educational level and status at the workplace, as well as working hours (part-time/full-time), tasks, and responsibilities.

While we were doing on-site observations in the supermarkets (Geertz 1973), it became clear to us that a simple category of age was not very accurate in defining, or allowing a more complete investigation of young workers; their life and work situations were far too varied. Other factors had to be incorporated and situated in the working practices to improve our understanding of their work situation. In a number of studies (Breslin et al. 2007a, 2007b; Kouvonen 2001; Lucas 1997), we found arguments to follow that path. Roberts (2011) argues that many policy-makers and researchers ‘fail(s) to account for the lack of homogeneity among young people’. This is also in line with Pierre Bourdieu, when he suggests that it is necessary ‘to analyse the differences between the different youth categories’ (1993, 48), and Stuart Tannock (2001, 2003), when he argues that different groups of young workers are highly diverse.

Accordingly, the first level in developing the categories was informed by the data production, taking into consideration the following two dimensions:

- Educational background and status at the workplace (following Tannock 2001, 2003)
- Tasks, responsibilities, and working hours (following Breslin et al. 2007a, 2007b)

On the basis of these two dimensions, the development of the youth categories was derived through systematically reading through and ordering the data material according to educational, structural, and hierarchical dimensions at the workplace in relation to the young employees. In the second step, we labelled the categories partly informed by other research about young adult workers and partly informed by the emerging categories in our data material. We then analysed the data in accordance with perceptions, positioning, and practices of work, for each of the categories of young workers (as described in Nielsen et al. 2013).

The categories differ from each other in terms of working hours, perspectives on work, type of work, risk management, self-image in relation to working conditions, and their position in the organization (Nielsen et al. 2013, 2014; Nielsen and Dyreborg 2013). The categories should not be seen as a typology of different kinds of young people. Rather, the categorization incorporates young employees’ life situation outside work, especially in relation to their educational situation, the conditions they have to work under, and their status in the workplace. The categories might also be seen as different positions on the labour market that young employees hold through their ‘transitions to and through the labour market’ (MacDonald 2009). In a recent study Pless (2014) shows how a group of Danish young people’s educational pathways are characterized by ‘multiple dropouts, detours and seemingly dead ends’ rather than ‘smooth operations’ (Plug and du Bois-Reymond 2006). While young people often ‘churn’ around categories (MacDonald 2009) they may at different points in their early working lives fit in more than one of these categorizations. We use these six categories as a starting point for the analysis of young people’s precarious employment in a Danish context.

Analysing precarious employment

The analyses consist of two parts. First, we arranged the interviews according to the above six categories. Next we analysed how young employees within the different categories view themselves through discursive representations of insecurity, volatility and lack of prospects for the future. We sought to determine whether and how these risks are represented within young employees' working experiences across the six categories of young employees. Following this we define precarious work in line with Kalleberg (2009): *'(...) employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker'* (Kalleberg 2009, 2).

We used the concept of 'positioning' to examine the production of subjectivity (Davies and Harré 1990). We use the concept to analyse how interviewees within the six categories of young employees position themselves while talking about their labour market situation, precariousness, and working conditions.

Young employees' discursive representations of precarious work

We describe how young employees are positioned and are positioning themselves through discursive representations of insecurity, volatility and lack of prospects for the future. We present illustrative results for each of the six categories and a summary of findings in Table 2.

Skilled young employees

Skilled young employees are often permanent employees who have undergone vocational educational training that may vary from sector to sector. Within the commercial sector, education targets work in retail, customer service, and trade. Within production and industry, education is focused on specific jobs such as metal forging or different types of mechanics. Training can last from 1½ to 5 years. Vocational training for healthcare and education students is targeted towards caretaking of other people as in social and health education. Common to the skilled young people is that they are often key participants in decision-making and often have responsibilities for other young people.

An example in this category of young employees is Mia. We interviewed Mia in 2011 when she was 24 years-old and a middle manager in a supermarket. She is educated as a shop-assistant and works full-time in a discount supermarket chain. There are several ways to become educated as a shop assistant in Denmark. Usually the 'Vocational Education and Training (VET)' programme for shop assistants lasts 3–4 years and builds on a completed elementary school. The VET programme alternates between practical training at a company and teaching at a vocational school. The apprentice is eligible for the State Educational Grant and Loan Scheme 'during periods of teaching at the school, and a minimum wage during the periods of practical training at the company.

Mia has made a successful career out of the work that started as a part-time job while she was still studying at university. Mia does not talk about the uncertain labour market and working conditions. On the contrary, she positions herself as a safe and secure employee in both the short and the long-term. She talks about a possible future at the big discount chain where she works:

Table 2. Main characteristics of six categories of young employees, their positions, types of contract, and assessment of whether they are in precarious employment or in transition.

Category	Main characteristics	Positioning themselves as:	Contract types	Precarious/ transition
Skilled workers	Usually working full-time in skilled jobs. Might have management responsibilities. Often they have a longer time perspective in the job than many other young employees. Identify themselves with the profession and workplace. Few can have short term contracts, and differ in this respect from the usual arrangement.	Core employees. Responsible for other employees.	Mainly Permanent (Full-time or part-time contract)	Usually not in transition nor in precarious work
Apprentices	Employed as trainees/apprentices at the workplace. Are engaged in the process of learning the trade/ profession. For most of them they have chosen their work/profession as a future career path.	Varies depending on experience and responsibility	Temporary (Fixed-term contract)	Transition
Sabbatical year workers	Working full-time for a longer period (often one to two years) before pursuing further education.	Varies depending on experience and responsibility	Permanent (Full-time or part-time contract)	Transition
Student workers	Work part-time while enrolled in general or vocational upper secondary education/medium-cycle higher education/long-cycle higher education outside the workplace. Typically they work irregular hours – after 15:00 and during weekends and holidays. Adapt their working hours to their education.	Peripheral employees at the bottom of the hierarchy	Permanent (Part-time contract)	Transition
Early school leavers	Work full-time in unskilled jobs. Have not had much success in the formal education system. Mostly young men. Are often assigned physically demanding tasks. This group can potentially work in unskilled jobs for many years, if they manage to keep their jobs.	At the bottom of the hierarchy	Permanent (Full-time or part-time contract)	Precarious
Temporary agency workers	May be skilled, educated in a similar occupation, in education or unskilled. Typically perform work at workplaces requiring day staffing, such as the health care sector. These temporary workers do not necessarily have prior knowledge of the workplace, other employees, or the specific work to be performed.	Peripheral employees outside the hierarchy.	Temporary (Fixed-term contract)	Precarious

Mia: If you have a foot inside the door here (at the supermarket chain) you can get very far.

Int.: And would you like that?

Mia: Maybe yes. In any case it is a good opportunity.

Int.: Please try to tell me what you want to get out of working here?

Mia: Well, it is not certain it will be my life. But it could be nice to rise slightly in the ranks. (...) I like to learn and I like the store profession as it is something you can see and feel and put into practice (24 years old, skilled full-time middle manager at the supermarket).

What is attractive for Mia is the possibility of staying at the supermarket chain in the future; 'it is a good option to have' she says, and emphasizes the feeling of certainty because she is able to stay in the same supermarket chain and maybe build a career. She attaches value to the work in the store as it is concrete, giving her control over how she performs, and how she can improve her work.

Mia: I have never experienced a situation where I felt uncomfortable. But of course it could easily occur when you are in a store.

When Mia is asked if she has ever been injured at work, she replies that she has never felt uncomfortable. Perhaps to meet the researcher's theme of uncertainty, she adds that it may of course occur.

The skilled young employees typically have skills that are essential for the work or production and therefore, her/his tasks are often different from the tasks performed by unskilled young people. In the retail sector, skilled young employees may be given management responsibilities at an early age. They traditionally have a long-term perspective in their work, and won't experience their work as precarious. This even seems to be the typical picture among the group of skilled young employees in our study, but the following two examples show that there are exceptions.

Sarah is 24 years old skilled employee and has parents with Arab background. She has been working in different jobs in retail since she was 16. The year before the interview was done (in 2015) she finished an education as shop assistant. After 6 month without work she was hired as an intern with wage subsidies (which is a part of the Danish employment policy for unemployed). Then she was employed on a six month contract also with wage subsidies from the municipality (also a part of Danish employment policy). When the last interview with her was done in autumn 2015 her contract was about to run out.

Sarah is one out of 24 employees in the discount supermarket. The shop manager and the assistant manager are the only employees who have permanent full-time employment. There is only one other full-time employee and he, like Sarah, is also employed with wage subsidies. All the other employees that the researcher meets in the supermarket while collecting data material during the daytime are hired with different forms of wage subsidies because of reduced working ability and are working part time. They all have various mental and physical problems. Other employees in the supermarket are all working part time outside normal opening hours. Half of them are under 18 years of age. In the interview Sarah tells that she hopes that her contract can be extended and changed into a permanent job:

Sarah: If they need me here (in the supermarket, red.) then I can continue.

Int.: Okay, so it's such a little uncertain?

Sarah: Yes.

Int.: How do you feel that it is such an uncertainty?

Sarah: Ah not so good. I want to find something permanent.

Sarah narrates from a precarious position on the labour market, she is not sure that she can keep the job and not sure if she ever manage to get a permanent job. This is despite the fact that Sarah is educated as a shop assistant. In fact it seems that her education seems to be a barrier of being hired permanently. The argument of why she cannot get a permanent job in the supermarket is the salary costs for her appointment:

- Int.: Last time we talked, you told me that you hoped to get your contract extended (in an interview 2 month before, red).
- Sarah: Yea, but until now he (the shop manager, red.) says that they spent too much on wages. He hasn't said that I can't stay here, just that we have to save the wages in the shop.
- Int.: Ok hmm but when do you think there will be a clarification?
- Sarah: Well that is what I have been promised since the first day I started. But if not I have to find something else.
- Int.: Do you think that it is going to be easy?
- Sarah: Well I was apprenticed a year ago (2014, red.). Then I had a period of half a year where I couldn't find a job. Then I got the internship here (with wage subsidies, red.). And after that they (the managers in the supermarket, red.) could only offer me one shift a week (without wage subsidies, red.). That wasn't enough.

Internal competition within the field of discount supermarkets, where many young people like Sarah are employed, lead to short term employment in order to *reduce labor and redundancy costs and, at the same time, increase flexibility in terms of deployment of human resources* (Keller and Seifert 2013), in this case young workers. In this supermarket employees with wage subsidies are used as a flexible resource of employment and to reduce the costs. As a consequence Sarah's chance of getting a permanent job in the supermarket is small. The temporary position does not work as a stepping stone towards a permanent position and she remains in what she views as a potentially precarious transition (see Murgia and Poggio 2014 for critique of atypical labour contracts targeted at young workers). Uncertainty is both in the short term and long term a part of Sarah's situation. Sarah tells of a number of situations where she has done her best to live up to the expectations of her employers, in trying to improve her chances of getting a permanent contract.

Sarah does not refer to her uncertain position as an explicit justification for why she puts pressure on herself, but she stresses the importance of mastering the work through a high work rate. We consider Sarah to be in uncertain and volatile work- and life situation- despite her skilled position.

The two skilled employees working as social and healthcare assistants quoted below are in jobs involving a high degree of security and the potential for a very long time horizon regarding employment. However, a slightly different picture is seen for these employees. They do not view continued work in this sector for years to come as necessarily positive. When asked, they claimed that it is not desirable to be in the job for many years;

- Julie: Because it's too hard. And now I am happy and have a surplus. I am fine with this position it is varied (in home care, ed.). There are people with new ... energy and such. So it is not just the same people who get annoyed and complain about the same residents for years.
- Karina: Yes, it is rare to meet a helper who has worked with care for 20 years, and where you think 'wow, she's a good helper'. In general, you think that they should ... they lack renewal and are too stuck (...)
(Newly qualified social and health care assistants, 21 and 20 years)

Precariousness in these two cases is not coming from the labour market situation as such, but from the physically demanding work. The potential for long-term employment is, therefore, not mentioned as something which is positive. These two social and health

care assistants represent a group of skilled employees that have not educated themselves out of a hard physical job, but rather *into* one. Perhaps this is the reason why they still talk from a position of transition, but they also see themselves as capable of making a transitions rather than 'being stuck.'

Apprentices and trainees

Apprentices are often employed in short-term positions. Most often they are not offered a new contract after ending their apprentice. They have embarked on a training process which typically lasts 1½ to 5 years depending on the sector and the type of vocational training.

In interviews with apprentices and trainees in the metal industry and retail sector, many spoke about being worried about losing their apprenticeship, or not being hired when their apprenticeship ends. Such concerns are often put forward as an argument for the need to prove that they have mastered the tasks in a way which adds value at the workplace (Nielsen 2012, 2013; Nielsen et al. 2014). Donald was an apprentice at a metal company when we interviewed him in 2011. He is a good example of a young, who wants *'just to give a little extra'*:

Int.: Why do you want 'just to give a little extra'?

Donald: You just want to show that you can actually do it. The work team have always known that 'he can do it.' But some days you can spend half an hour on something one day, and then you think 'I can damn well do it better, maybe you can save five minutes here and there.' So you just want to work a little harder. You also want to do something so that you get asked to stay. (Donald, 22 years old, blacksmith apprentice in metal industry)

The workplace where Donald is an apprentice attaches great importance to working overtime during busy periods. At the same time, Donald said that it is also important to be able to work quickly and efficiently (and save 'half an hour here and there'). He wants to show he can work quickly in order to *'be asked to stay'*. Donald describes the temporary nature of his employment as a form of economic pressure that has a negative effect on the way he practices his work.

Another example is Sannie, who is a supermarket trainee. She has half a year left of her apprenticeship and would like to be employed in the same supermarket once she has finished.

Sannie: Those products, they just have to go out into the store. Sometimes it's as if the boss is standing behind you saying 'come on' (claps her hands). That's how it feels sometimes. And then sometimes you just forget to bend at the knees and not the back. (Sannie 21 years, supermarket trainee)

Just like Donald, the blacksmith apprentice, Sannie says that she wants to show her immediate supervisor that she can work quickly. She also feels that working quickly is often prioritized at the expense of safety. Sannie does not refer to her position as a temporary trainee as an explicit justification for these practices, but like Sarah the skilled worker, she stresses the importance of mastering the work through a high work rate. The prospect of Sannie and Donald's short-term apprenticeship/trainee contracts amplifies these two young individuals' need to appear to be good students/apprentices who,

for better or worse, have mastered the work. If they are to have any hope of further employment at the workplace when their contracts expire, they need to be considered competent trainees/apprentices.

The trainees/apprentices indicate a degree of uncertainty regarding future opportunities, i.e. obtaining a permanent position once they have completed their apprenticeships. The apprentices, the trainees, and the skilled workers with a short term contracts all share the same need to position themselves as good employees and the fear of losing their jobs. Thus working hard played a significant role for the upward progression for these young people as other studies also indicate (Roberts 2011, 2013). However, the apprentices in our study are attending vocational training which might increase their social mobility. Although these young people are employed in temporary jobs, we do not consider them really to be caught in uncertain and volatile working conditions. These young people are in a transitional phase, which is associated with a certain degree of uncertainty, but they are on their way to become skilled employees with chances for more permanent work contracts. These young employees have occupational identities related to the trade, and access to a possible future career.

Sabbatical year employees

A number of Danish youth work a year or more before they begin a higher education, or they take a sabbatical during their studies. Such a break from their studies thus represents a non-linear transition. The sabbatical year employees are usually in full-time employment. They are often unskilled in the profession, although they may have acquired important skills during their education or from previous work experiences. We interviewed Morten in 2011, who was in a typical employment situation while taking a sabbatical year between studies working in a full-time job as a service assistant. When asked about the volatility in his work and the working conditions he answers:

Morten: I think that I had better beware. But then I also think "Fuck it, I'm only here for the summer." (19 year-old sales assistant in a supermarket)

Morten mentions the volatility of his work as a reason for not caring about the pain in the lower back. The temporary employment is used as a form of legitimization of the lack of care for safety in his work. Thomas is 24 years old and employed as a shop assistant. Just like Morten, he tells about the physically demanding work that he is accepting at the moment, because it is temporary, and because he needs the salary that he earns:

Thomas: It's not the most fun job. I could think of a lot of other things to do. But so far it's fine. So I get some money, and I am saving some money, and then ... Right now I do not have something specifically (education, ed.) in which I know I want to enrol.

Int.: Is it difficult to get jobs at the moment (2011, red.)?

Thomas: I really think it was difficult. I did send many applications around. And it was everything from cleaning and things like that. I believe that my paper doesn't look very good. I have not had so many jobs before because I've had a break, while I went to school to become an engineer.

Typically for these young employees they have little incentive to integrate themselves fully into the work group. Thomas and Morten both expressed that their unskilled full-time job is a temporary situation, and therefore acceptable to them. They both expect to

educate themselves out of hard, unskilled work. They see the temporary nature of the work as part of a transition. The temporary condition of their work means that they do not take the lack of safety so seriously; *'I think I do it fairly well'*, Thomas says. Both express an instrumental relation to their actual work.

Student employees

Student employees are enrolled in education but also have a job whilst they are studying. In our observations, student employees are typically working in retail and often they are working part-time outside normal working hours.

Kira was 19 years old, when we interviewed her in 2011. Then she worked partly as a part-time sales assistant in a supermarket, partly in a cafe while she was studying. For her, working as an unskilled employee is also a temporary condition. She says:

Kira: Working conditions are really good here (in the supermarket, ed.). Take the salary for example; here we get pay supplements, also after 6 o'clock in the afternoon and on Sundays. You will not get that in my other job. So there really is a big difference. I still keep the job at the cafe, because I need the money. Therefore, I don't object to it; 'you know what, it's really too bad that I don't get this pay supplement'. I would like to keep the job, because I don't have any other opportunities. One could say that the crisis also affects us (2011 red.), because there are so few jobs. So I think that we accept a little more than we usually do. (19 years old, sales assistant in the supermarket and waiter at a cafe)

Kira positions herself as a young employee in a situation of youth unemployment. The lack of jobs and the crisis in 2008 are provided as reason for why Kira is accepting not getting the pay supplement in the café job, which she knows that she is entitled to. She indicates that she keeps her job until new opportunities appear. Kira explains that this is why she does not object. The work in the supermarket is described as a good work. Unlike her other job at the café, Kira gets the salary that she is entitled to in the supermarket. She describes the job in the supermarket as a good job, compared to other less attractive temporary and unskilled jobs, which are the ones you usually get as a young unskilled employee.

The sabbatical year employees described in the previous section and the student employees are in different stages of a transition process; while the first group has a break in a course of education, the second group is in a course of education while having a student job besides. This does not mean that the volatility in their jobs, and thus an unsafe income, is not posing a risk to these young people, as they have the same kind of need for solid earnings as other social groups. But basically, they are in a process of transition from school to skilled work, even though this might represent un-linear transitions. Therefore we will not consider their work as precarious work in the sense that Standing (2011) defines it. While these young people are in a transition process, which might share some of the same problems as precarious work, the mechanisms are different.

Early school leavers

Early school leavers (ESL) or early leavers from education and training (ELET) denotes young employees who typically has not had much success in the formal educational

system and has dropped out of one or more vocational education and training school. This group of young employees is primarily made up of young men who work full time in unskilled jobs. Their work is often characterized by routine and demanding physical work, compared to the work of the other young employees in retail.

Peter is a typical example of the early school leavers we have interviewed. He was 18 years-old when we interviewed him in 2011. He worked full-time as a service assistant in a supermarket. He never completed an education and talks about many defeats through his years in school. Like several of the above-quoted young, he talks about the demanding physical work.

- Peter: I am a kind of Jack-of-all-trades, if you can call it that. I do all the stuff that the others (his colleges, red.) do not bother to do.
- Int.: Okay ...
- Peter: If they spill something on the floor, then they call at me.
- Int.: Okay, is it fair?
- Peter: No, that's not fair, I think. But what can I do about it? Not so much.
For Peter the hard physical work is not a temporary condition:
- Int.: But how can it be that you have worked with such heavy stuff since you were 15?
- Peter: I do not know, people just abused my body. It is probably because I was so big, when I was younger. I suppose I could lift a lot.
- Int.: So, because you are strong?
- Peter: Yes, and they have taken advantage of it. And it has been like that because I have been stupid, and thought that it was fun to work with such things. So I just said 'yes why not?' and first now I have discovered that it was probably not that wise (Peter has a sore back and joints. Ed.).
- Int.: Is it difficult to get such a job?
- Peter: Yes, for the time being, It's hard to get a job anywhere at all (2011, ed.).
- Int.: Is it relevant to why you're here?
- Peter: Yes, it is. I do not really dare to quit, because I know where I end up and it is at the job centre. It would bother me to sit there every fucking day. So I still have to deal with something, plus you get a little better pay, than when you are on social benefit. (Peter is 18 years of age and service assistant in a supermarket)

Early school leavers represent one of the two categories of young employees that can clearly be characterized as having precarious work. In Peter's case, he narrates from a position where he is currently exposed to physically demanding work with no possibilities to improve his position in the future. He does not speak from a position in transition, as the student employees and sabbatical year students did. This category of young employee is forced to work continuously in demanding and often unsafe working conditions. Social benefit is not an option, as it has been reduced significantly for young people under 30 in Denmark in the recent years. It means that all young people under the age of 30 without formal qualifications must accept educationally directed training in order to continue to claim benefits (Görlich and Katznelson 2015). However, in the case of Peter, this does not seem to be an option. Peter expresses a kind of resignation when he accepts the conditions that the work in the supermarket requires.

Schildrick and MacDonald (2007) found, that young working class men in their study experienced the same kind of insecure '*poor work*', as Peter experienced in the present study. The young men in their study worked in the same sort of jobs in many years, and did not work their way up from lower level employment to higher positions (Schildrick and MacDonald 2007). The authors denote this '*poor transitions*' and find parallels to this

in an earlier study by Furlong and Cartmel (2004). The authors argue, that these ‘poor transitions’ are consequence of the flexible nature of low-skilled employment, where employers, according to their informants, can be fired at short notice (Shildrick and MacDonald 2007). The ‘poor transitions’ found in these studies are very similar to the ‘transitions’ we see among early school leavers in our study, where we prefer the term ‘*precarious work*’. In line with this MacDonald (2007) argues that:

(...)less advantaged young adults (...) precarious employment can be a serious and lasting affair that comes to define their labour market transitions and outcomes. (170)

It is not likely that these unskilled young employees, like Peter, will find work that is more lenient than his actual work.

Temporary agency worker

Young temporary agency workers represent a broad category of employees that can be both unskilled and skilled. Some of them are enrolled in education and training related to the actual type of work, and some related to their vocational training.

One such temporary agency worker is Maria; she is 22 years old and works as a temp at a nursing home. She has been called in to work in most of the different sections in the nursing home. In the daytime she is enrolled in nursing school, and therefore she is mainly called in for the evening and night shifts.

Maria: As a temporary and young you can be a little disadvantaged in some places. Especially in my younger years, I really had a hard time saying no. One was sent out to those residents that the permanent staff did not bother to take care of. That is often the way it works here, because: “Oh”, then the permanent staff do not need to fight with the relatives. ... So I think it’s a combination of being young and being a temporary staff. So, your voice will not be heard. (Maria 22 year’s old, social and health care assistant doing temporary work in a nursing home)

In the interview Maria mentions several types of risks which she connects to her work as a loosely affiliated agency. She narrates from a position as experienced in the field and looks back on the time when she felt young and exposed. This position enables her to formulate a very sharp critique of the issues to which she believes that temporary agency workers are exposed.

Maria talks about risks related to coming as an outsider to a workplace that she did not know. Maria rarely knows the residents, and feels that she cannot always deliver the optimal care; she cannot always anticipate and take into account the situational factors, such as a resident with a violent behaviour. This category of employee is peripherally positioned in the social life of the workplace and lowest in the hierarchy when tasks are allocated. For this category of young employees, we consider the work to be highly uncertain and volatile (Nielsen et al. 2017). This also includes unequal distribution of workload and job tasks that exposes temporary employees with low social status at higher risks (Krøjer, Lehn-Christiansen, and Nielsen 2014; Myers and Lipscomb 2010). Our observations are supported by the study of Bena et al. (2013), which described high risks of injuries related to short tenure. The authors emphasizes that young employees in particular are vulnerable, since they often lack the experience needed to countervail the effects of short tenures (Bena et al. 2013). However, the explanation may be simplistic given the

actual work exposures these young people are experiencing. In other words, part of their excess risk may simply reflect dangerous work assignments.

The observed main characteristics of the six youth categories and our assessment of whether they are in precarious work or in transition are summarized in [Table 2](#) above.

Discussion

In this article we focused on young employees who are often viewed as particularly vulnerable in relation to uncertain and volatile, or 'precarious' work. Through empirical analysis of young Danish employees' discursive representation of their work, we attempted to see whether 'precarious' work applied differentially to different groups of young people at work. We have previously described different categories of young employees in terms of the hours they work, perspective on work, type of work, education and training, and position in the organization (Nielsen et al. [2013](#), [2014](#); Nielsen and Dyreborg [2013](#)).

The categories of young employees included in this paper position themselves within different levels of uncertainty and volatility in their work. This also applies for the skilled young employees represented in this paper. Their skills are often essential in the job and therefore their tasks are often different from the tasks performed by unskilled young employees and they often work on permanent contracts. Most of the skilled employees represented in this paper position themselves as employees with a relatively high level of job security. Even this is the general picture; we found exceptions from this with cases of skilled employees working on a short term contract with wage subsidies. Being skilled might not always lead to job security (MacDonald [2009](#)), and in this case short contracts does not always provide a stepping stone towards a more stable job (Murgia and Poggio [2014](#)). Also the skilled social and health care assistants ascribe a degree of uncertainty to whether they can keep doing the job in the long run, as they consider the work to be physically demanding and they perceive long-term employment as stagnation. A perhaps critical factor differentiating them from other groups is their ability to envision possible transition to other types of work, rather than being stuck in an entry level job.

The young apprentices and trainees are employed in temporary employment which some of them experience as both uncertain and risky. Although these young people are employed in temporary jobs, we do not consider them to be in precarious work, because these categories of young employees are on their way to become skilled employees with the potential for having a permanent work contract. The same applies to the young employees who are working in temporary student jobs or having a job in a sabbatical year between their studies; they are in a transition process. Their situation share commonalities with precarious work at the workplace level. In his work, Standing divided youth within the Precariat in two groups: 'The Grinners' and 'The Groaners':

Among youth, the 'grinners' are students and travelling backpackers, happy to take casual jobs with no long-term future; the 'groaners' are those unable to enter the labour market through apprenticeships or the equivalent, or competing with 'cheaper' old agers with no need for enterprise benefits. (Standing [2011](#), 59)

With this paper we question whether student work is to be labelled precarious work. Although these young people are employed in temporary jobs, we do not consider them really to be in a precarious situation. These young people appear truly to be in a

transitional phase, which is associated with a degree of uncertainty, and for some this uncertainty is increased in cases of non-linearity between school and work. It has been discussed whether precarious jobs are a matter of lifestyle choice (Castel 2003) or choice of biography. However, our data cannot support this assumption, as the young student employees we interviewed did it as a matter of necessity. They were dependent on their income.

This is not to say, that it is not important to provide various instruments and support for these young people in the transition from school to work, and also to take precautions for their higher risk of injuries at work. The differential risk of young employees is partly explained by their more peripheral position at the work place (Nielsen et al. 2014, 2017). In respect to this, the six categories of young employees (Table 2) indicate that the young employees' affiliation to the workplace has to be considered as very different. This is also supported by Håkansson and Isidorsson (2015) who argue that temporary workers are used as labour market 'buffers', and that it is the '*buffer-position*' that results in a lack of job security.

This applies in particular to the category '*temporary agency workers*' characterized as being peripherally positioned in the social life of the workplace and lowest in the hierarchy when tasks are assigned. For this category of young employees, we find their work to be highly uncertain and volatile. The same applies to the category '*Early school leavers*' who also can be characterized as working under uncertain and volatile working conditions. In addition, these two categories of young employees are likely to work continuously in demanding and unsafe working conditions. These two groups are thus very important in terms of both a high level of uncertainty and being exposed to risky work. Both of these groups of young employees have low social status, appear to be poorly integrated into the workplace and risk to be kept in a precarious life situation, because their employment do not offer them the skill development that could contribute to a further transition (Roberts 2011, 2013).

In this paper we explored the specific uncertainty related to whether young people have access to a safe and steady working life. Further, our categorizations of employed youth may fit better in the Danish context than in others. The role of apprentices can vary across international economies and even trade groups within a given country in ways that may have profound influence on precariousness. The active labour market policies and the educational policies that have sought to increase the qualifications of young workers might also play an important role within the Nordic welfare model. Firstly, if you include more young people in the educational system they will not appear in the unemployment statistics, and they will have longer transition periods between education and employment. Secondly, this might contribute to increase their prospects for more permanent jobs in the long run. Thus the Nordic welfare model probably alleviates the risk of young people being trapped in precarious work. This should be taken into consideration in the interpretation of the results and in further explorations of relationships between duration of transition periods and risk of being trapped in precarious work. This example points to an important limitation, in relation to Standing's concept of precarious work, that contextual factors are not considered very well.

The question is if skilled fulltime work that traditionally has been the ultimate goal of youth life transition processes, is so challenged that we cannot refer to youth as a phase of transition. However, based on our analysis we maintain, that young people's

transition processes and precarious work have to be seen as two different phenomena, if we want to adequately target the more precarious of the young employees. We find it important to distinguish between these young people in a transitional phase in their life and those young employees trapped in precarious working conditions. However, this paper also emphasizes that the working conditions of young employees who are in transition show similarities to what is described as 'precarious work', and therefore these young peoples' working conditions should not be ignored, even while this is only a transitional phase in their working life.

Conclusions

Precarious work is far from a characteristic of all the categories of young employees. For some young employees uncertain and volatile work is a temporary condition in their process of transition from school or apprenticeship to work, while for others there is a high risk of continued uncertain and risky work. It is not surprising that all young people do not appear to be in danger of ending up in precarious work. Some are employed in a temporary student jobs which have commonalities with precarious working conditions at the workplace level, while other groups of young people have a higher risk to remain unskilled resulting in long-term uncertain and unstable employment. The latter group of young employees are the ones who deserve more attention as a potentially high risk group on numerous levels.

Exploration of how lower social standing and lack of integration into the workplace are related to future employment are warranted. There are likely profound differences between young employees, such as student employees, who chose not to become integrated into the workplace and those who are not integrated because of lower social status, such as early school leavers, or because of unwanted temporary or part-time contracts.

Further, the risk of being stuck in uncertain and volatile work seems to be more pronounced for the groups of young people who already occupy marginal positions in the labour market and within the educational system. Volatile and temporary work also relates to young peoples' transition processes between education and work, but seen in this perspective precariousness is not necessary a permanent condition, but a condition that relates to a transitional phase in their life. Also an active labour marked policy building on improving young people's qualifications probably will mitigate the risk that prolonged transitions periods will result in precarious work among young employees.

Despite the precise categorizations of work done by youth may need to be clarified in different contexts, we still consider that precarious work is not, in fact, simply a characteristic of being young and employed. Rather it is related to their position in the labour market, the possibilities for education and training, and the type of jobs in which they are employed. While some are in transition, others are at risk of being trapped in precarious work.

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