



# Without a Safety Net: Precarization Among Young Danish Employees<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

'Precarisation' is one of the concepts that has become important in efforts to explain how neo-liberal politics and changed economic conditions produce new forms of marginalization and increased insecurity. The aim of this article is to examine how subjectivity is produced among young Danish employees through socio-material processes of precarization at workplaces and employment projects.

Drawing on ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews with 35 young employees and young people 'Neither in Education, Employment or Training' (NEET), the three case examples show how processes of precarization, rooted in global economic and political conditions, can be understood as situated contextual practices. It is demonstrated how being positioned as an easily replaceable source of labor is shaping young people's processes of subjectification.<sup>1</sup>

## KEYWORDS

*Ethnography / precarious work / retail / safety / social and health work / subjectification / young employees*

## Introduction

When Jeb Bush during the summer of 2015 took a ride with Uber, precarious work conditions instantaneously became an issue in the US presidential elections. Uber, a US-owned taxi service, was launched in 2009, making it possible for customers

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to order taxis directly from the nearest available Uber driver using a mobile phone app. In US, this is called ‘work-on-demand’.

Uber’s business model is notorious and criticized for undermining the basic rights of its drivers. What makes this US anecdote interesting in a Nordic context is the fact that precarious working conditions is a global phenomenon tied to far-reaching economic, technological, and social changes. The Uber business model illustrates how the insecurity of today’s labor market is transferred to the individual worker, in this case the Uber driver. Young employees have always constituted an attractive labor resource ready to deliver ‘work-on-demand’ on short notice, outside normal business hours, and during vacations and holidays. They deliver unskilled, low-pay, flexible, and part-time work to a labor market that increasingly demands such labor resources (Nielsen & Dyreborg, 2015).

Internationally, the Nordic Model, in which labor market actors, law-makers, and official authorities cooperate on the development of the labor market (Dyreborg, 2011), is often pointed out as a solution to the challenges facing workers and labor markets globally (Kalleberg, 2009). Compared with the rest of Europe, Denmark has high levels of employment among young people, while also boasting high levels of education (Görlich & Katznelson, 2015). Social security measures mean that precarious employment in the Danish context does not have quite as far-reaching negative consequences as in countries without the same levels of state-run social security. However, like in the rest of Europe, Denmark has seen a rise in part-time employment, temporary jobs, and different varieties of subsidized temporary employment, especially among young people. At least one out of six below the age of 35 has been in a temporary job position in 2013 (Scheuer, 2014). This development makes it relevant to focus on challenges faced by the youth labor force.

Three ethnographic tales (Van Maanen, 2010) serve as starting point for looking into the lives of young Danes on the margins of the Labor market. Inspired by Nikolas Rose (1989), the paper investigates how three young Danes are influenced and shaped by precarious employment. We investigate how young people develop subjectivities through material and discursive processes of precarization, at workplaces and during employment schemes, and ask how these processes become co-constitutive for young peoples’ subjectification. Furthermore, we discuss whether the insecurities and risks of precarisation are mainly connected to the general transitory nature of being a young adult or whether processes of precarization reach into and become defining for later stages of life as well.

In the following sections, the broader understanding of society underlying our case analyses will be addressed: What is ‘precarious work’ in the Danish context and how can concepts like ‘assembling subjects’ (Rose, 1989) and ‘neo-liberal self-technologies’ (Davies & Petersen, 2005; Petersen & Flynn, 2007) enhance our understanding of this phenomenon?

## What is precarious work?

The concepts of ‘precarious work’, ‘precarisation’ and ‘the Precariat’ (Standing, 2011) conceptualize how current neo-liberal policies and changed economic conditions produce new forms of marginalization on the labor market (Casas-Cortés, 2014; Furlong,

2015). The concepts address the increased insecurity and instability of modern working life. 'Precarious work' is not an easily definable phenomenon; it includes several kinds of insecurity and vulnerability for workers, without clear definitions of exact types of working conditions (Quinlan et al., 2001; Rasmussen & Håpnes, 2012; Underhill & Quinlan, 2011). There seems, however, to exist a common understanding among researchers that insecure employment is a growing problem, especially among young, unskilled workers with limited education (Duell, 2004; Hamilton et al., 2014; MacDonald, 2007), but also among the highly educated (Rasmussen & Håpnes, 2012). In a UK context, Standing (2011) claims that a new class of workers is emerging as an increased demand for flexibility that transfers work risk and insecurity to individual workers. This class of precarious workers is characterized by being without any stable professional identity, without access to a future professional career, and without social security. This lack of security in employment is, Standing claims, a radical encroachment on people's lives. Being in precarious circumstances means, according to Standing, being forced to develop a way of life defined by the needs and opportunities of the moment, without the opportunity to establish a stable identity and without experiences of professional and personal progress (Standing, 2011).

In line with this, a recent Nordic survey of young people (18–34 years old) in six European countries concludes, that '(...) the weaker the link to the labor market, the less likelihood of happiness, optimism, and health' (Bergqvist & Erikson, 2015, p. 27).

In accordance with the analytical perspective of the present article, we define 'precarious work' – inspired by Kalleberg – as follows:

'(...) An employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker'. (Kalleberg, 2009, p. 2)<sup>2</sup>.

In the article, this form of uncertainty and unpredictability is the starting point for understanding how precarious labor market positions affect the subjectification processes of young people.

## Youth employment in the Danish context

The regulation of the labor market in Denmark consists of legislation and collective agreements and provides a framework for employees' working conditions and basic employment rights. 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 et al., 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 have led to a political support for significant changes to the Danish welfare state and the policy pursued, including Danish educational and labor market policies. He argues that the driver of the profound changes to the Danish welfare state has been increased international competition.

The welfare reforms of the last 15 years have reduced the extent of employment rights by introducing stricter requirements to be eligible for unemployment benefits

and shorter periods for eligibility. People working on fixed term contract, part-time, or for temporary workers' agencies face challenges regarding protection and eligibility for unemployment benefits. In particular for employees who work very short hours or agency workers who move between different temporary positions, severe gaps exist in basic protection (Rasmussen et al., 2015).

The change in Denmark toward a markedly more 'active labor 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 (The Danish Ministry of Employment, 2013; Görlich & Katznelson, 2015).

In line with this, there is a high degree of political awareness on young people's education and on the residual group who have not completed their formal education (Pless, 2013). 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.

The organization of the labor market 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, p. 16).

Some argue, however, that the 'flexicurity system' is currently changing toward more 'flexi' than 'secure'. Scheuer (2011) argues that the development of the Danish labor market over the past 10–20 years has been characterized by the displacement of working life risks onto specific groups of employees with atypical employment contracts, who are no longer covered by the protection and rights that apply to 'typical' employment contracts (Scheuer, 2011). 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, p. 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). In Sweden, the share of underemployment and temporary work is also increased, especially among young employees between 15 and 24 years old, the increase is significant (Arbetskraftsundersökningarna, 2015 A & B).

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 Danish educational policies and the very active labor market policy of the country.

In this article, the category 'young' refers to workers between the ages of 18 and 30. As such, the category is defined by age alone. However, previous research has directed attention to the large degree of heterogeneity found among this age group (Nielsen et al., 2013). Typically, there will also be marked differences between the positions and working conditions in which young workers find themselves at different workplaces; differences that might only to a limited extent be said to be due to age. The three young

workers quoted in the paper represent, respectively, the categories ‘sabbatical year young worker’, ‘temporary worker’, and ‘education drop-out’ (Nielsen & Dyreborg, 2015; Nielsen et al., 2013). Rasmussen et al. (2015) point to the working on fixed-term contracts, as part-time employees, or in temporary jobs experience as the ones experiencing the most severe gaps in fundamental employment rights.

## **Precarious work – short-term or long-term insecurity?**

To many young workers, part-time or temporary positions have traditionally constituted a stepping stone for entering the labor market. Some choose this path as part of a deliberate job strategy while studying, whereas others work under such precarious conditions out of necessity alone (Andersen & Klinken, 2013; Nielsen & Dyreborg, 2015; Nielsen et al., 2014s). Duell (2004) points out those young workers, in particular, run a high risk of being stuck with insecure jobs if early precarious employment does not lead to permanent positions.

Traditionally, the transitions of youth in a labor market context have been regarded as linear processes leading from education to employment. This has changed, however, and transitions are today looked upon as processes of potential insecurity and fragmentation, perhaps leading to precarious labor market positions (Furlong, 2015; Görlich & Katznelson, 2015). Woodman and Wyn describe how an entire youth generation – due to labor market insecurity – may no longer hope to achieve the kinds of adult lives experienced by their parents (Woodman & Wyn, 2015). The authors address a state of insecurity that may well define the scope of opportunities for young people in the present generation throughout their lives.

## **The analytic approach**

### **Theoretical framework**

Inspired by Nikolas Rose (1989), the paper investigates how the subjectification processes of three young Danes are influenced and shaped by a context of precarious employment. Rose poses the question of how ‘(...) we understand ourselves, and how are we understood by those who administer, manage, organize, improve, police and control us?’ (ibid, p. vii). With reference to Rose’s concept of ‘assembling subjects’, we look into the question of how subjects are constituted through techniques that reach beyond the boundaries of the body and into specific locations or situations, such as nursing homes, supermarkets, and employment schemes. The concept describes how subjects ‘gather’ in ‘apparata’ such as employment schemes – and the procedures, schedules, and participatory demands of these – or supermarkets with their check-out counters, lifting gear, and work rota. Within these ‘apparata’, subjects are assigned a range of options, motivations, feelings, and self-reflections (Rose, 1989, p. xx), by which they live and orient themselves. According to Rose, subjectivities are shaped by self-directed strategies, which on the one hand allow for autonomy and freedom of choice while on the other hand subjecting the individual to a tremendous pressure to act responsibly and avoid mismanaging that freedom (Rose, 1989). Exploring

subjectivities is, according to Rose, exploring the practices, apparatus, technologies, through which subjects understand themselves. The concept of assembling subjects is used in the analyses as a metatheoretical perspective on the processes through which subjectification takes place.

Many sociologists, social psychologists, and philosophers, inspired by Rose's and Foucault's thinking, point out that being valuable with regard to the labor market does not only follow dominant economic and political rationales but is also defined by individual subjects seeking to interpret and perform collective rationales as part of their subjectification. Concepts like 'neo-liberal self-technologies' (Davies & Petersen, 2005; Petersen & Flynn, 2007) and 'Homo Economicus' (Brown, 2003) offer ways of explaining what the current societal developments do to young adolescents. They conceptualize how people continuously create and evaluate themselves on the grounds of which choices and actions seem most profitable on the current market. The concept of 'neo-liberal self-technologies' provides a way to investigate how different kinds of precarization become resources in young workers' production of subjectivity. We investigate how precarization influences the ways in which young workers evaluate and subjectify themselves in order to increase their market value (Davies & Petersen, 2005; Petersen & Flynn, 2007) on a precarious labor market.

## Methods

### Recruitment and data material

The empirical data are derived from two research projects on young peoples introduction to work and employment and education schemes. Even though the projects had different research designs and research questions, issues of precarity became evident during the process of analyzing the material in both projects. We therefore identified fertile ground for a joint analysis, as it allowed for a broader analysis of processes of precarization.

In Project A, the aim was to investigate introduction practices at workplaces employing young people. The data material presented in this article is selected among the ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews with persons employed within the retail and care sectors aged between 18 and 30 years.

In Project B, the aim was to strengthen young people's participation in education. The data presented here are drawn from qualitative interviews with 11 persons aged between 15 and 19 years. The participants were unemployed and without formal education and were participating in various employment and education schemes.

In Project A, young workers in the retail sector were recruited with help from the labor-marked social partners in retail, and for the care sector, recruitment was carried out in cooperation with a local municipality. Within each sector, 10 young people were included, and observations were conducted as 'shadowing', meaning that the participants were accompanied while performing their daily tasks by a researcher (Czarniawska, 2007). In all, 54 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with the young employees, their closest colleagues, and managers. Focus were on introduction to work tasks, access to help and support from colleagues and managers, and notions of the work.

In Project B, recruitment took place in cooperation with educational case workers in a local municipality. It was an investigation into processes of learning and change among young people between the ages of 15 and 19 within a small Danish municipality. Eleven young people were observed, through shadowing observation. In total, 40 qualitative individual interviews were conducted focusing on school experiences, work experiences, etc.

Thus, the width of the material gave access to analyzing how precarization does not only 'weave' into work-related conditions but also into education and employment schemes.

In order to secure anonymity, all names and institutions referred to is pseudonyms.

## Analysis

In order to present a cross-project analysis for this paper, data material is presented as three 'ethnographic tales' (Van Maanen, 2010). These tales are constructed on the basis of a thematic analysis of interview transcriptions and observation notes from field work in the two projects. The process of selecting these three tales is based on a theoretical reading and analysis of all the material, through which the three cases stood out as the most fruitful in relation to processes of precarisation. Ethnographic tales is considered to be a way of presenting data material, but are at the same time a result of the initial analysis of all the case material as well as an in-depth reading of the data related to one specific case (see Tanggaard & Brinkmann, 2010).

## Selection of data and construction of ethnographic tales

The researcher's task is to 'translate' ethnographic data material, so that readers are presented with a coherent and convincing interpretation of the practice being studied (Van Maanen, 2010). We have selected among data to construe tales that offer readers a view of how different precarization processes become co-constituent of young adults' subjectification. The data material shows great diversity as to how precarity manifests itself, but labor market insecurity as a general condition is at the core of the young interviewees' considerations. The three cases presented in this paper have been chosen because the interviewees describe the work conditions to be uncertain, risky, and unpredictable (Kalleberg, 2009). As such, these cases are not chosen to represent the data material, but rather to illustrate themes and issues identified in the analysis of data from both of the research projects. The tales took shape in a process of construction in which clarity and recognizability were sought balanced against ambiguity and nuances.

Ethnographic validity is obtained through the credibility of the text (Cunliffe, 2010). The question to ask is whether it appears authentic, nuanced, and convincing with regard to the researcher's rendering and interpretation of the practices studied.

We will now turn to the presentation of the three ethnographic tales, each of them followed by an analysis of the precarisation process described in that tale. Finally, cross-case conclusions are discussed.

## Ethnographic tale: Elias

It's Elias' first day at work. He's been equipped with a hooded sweatshirt with a logo on the chest, sporting the store colors. I (the first author of the paper) am allowed to accompany him while a shop supervisor introduces him to the store.

Elias is 19. He's been working retail jobs since the age of 16. When I first meet Elias, he has not yet been given his contract. He later finds out that he's hired for 7 hours a week with one weekly shift from 4 p.m. to 11 p.m., but that he is expected to take on more shifts whenever his work is needed at the store. Elias would prefer more shifts, being dependent on the income. He's in trial period of 3 months during the course of which he or his employer may cancel the contract on short notice. He's assigned as a 'key holder', which means that he is responsible for the opening and closing of the store, counting cash after closing time, and supervising his younger colleagues below 18. During opening hours, he's to run the check-out counter and fill goods onto the shelves. Elias is waiting to join a vocational training school where he plans to train as an electrician.

The supervisor who is to introduce Elias to the routines of the store is called Tim. He is one out of four full-time employees at the workplace, the total number of employees being 13.

The introduction starts at the storage room where, after a round of initial small-talk, Tim says:

'We have had approximately one robbery per month, so we're pretty hard-hit. So it's really important to comply with security rules. After 9 p.m., you always need to be two in the front room. If you need a smoke, you need to stand outside where you can see the check-out counter. Actually, we've just had a big case where we lost a huge sum of money (...).'

We continue our tour of the storage room. Tim points to the door leading to the refrigerated counter and explains that Elias should always remember to shove a pallet in front of the counter. Twice during the last couple of weeks, someone went past the counter into the storage room to steal something. Elias is not told, however, how to act in case potential thieves become threatening or violent.

We leave the storage room and enter the main area again. Tim asks Elias whether he's familiar with 'trimming' (organizing shelves). When Elias says 'yes', Tim replies: 'good, you know what to do then'. After showing Elias the room where empty bottles are kept, Tim leads us to the check-out counters, where a long queue of customers has formed. Tim: 'Why don't you take a look at how Medina handles it? So that you know how to do things?'

Tim places himself at the other counter. After five minutes, Elias suggests that he takes over Medina's counter while she monitors him. So, after having been in the supermarket for a mere half hour, Elias places himself at a check-out counter and calls to the waiting customers: 'We're open over here'. Going from being 'The new guy' to including himself in the 'we' of the supermarket took half an hour. In a subsequent interview, Elias tells me:

'I'm a bit worried, because I haven't told them about my knee injury. And they (management, ed.) may get cross over that. But I feel ready again, myself. Something really bad would have to happen (for him not to be able to work, ed.) – so I'll just have to make sure it doesn't.'

- Interviewer: ‘On the other hand, one might expect them to be considerate about it? But you don’t think they will be?’
- Elias: ‘Well, in my experience, managers don’t see things in that way. They only think about their business and ... how to make money in the quickest possible way. And I’m well aware that I’m just lucky I got the job. The manager’s got 15 other applications on his desk. You know, firing me wouldn’t be a problem to him. So I don’t think they care much about that.’
- Interviewer: ‘So you don’t feel confident they’ll look after you?’
- Elias: ‘No’.
- Interviewer: ‘It seems to me that you’re used to living with that kind of insecurity?’
- Elias: ‘Well, I’ve just never experienced anything else; than managers are often selfish. But I’m the one that wants to make some money and have a job. So it’s either accepting it or walking out’.

A month later, I return to the same supermarket to interview Elias. He tells me that last Saturday night three young employees were threatened with a gun while a masked man emptied the cash register. Understandably, Elias is shocked. I tell him that I’ve wondered why Tim didn’t tell him how to react upon a robbery. Elias confirms to me that no one has told him since that first day. He says it only proves that ‘managers only think about themselves and their turnover’, something he repeats several times during the interview. I then ask him how things have been with his knee.

- Elias: ‘It’s funny you should mention it, because I have in fact been handling something a bit too heavy, I think. I’m actually having an operation, just now in March’ (laughs nervously).
- Interviewer: ‘Okay?! What happened?’
- Elias: ‘I had to carry these boxes. They were a bit heavier than I thought. So my knee just snapped’.
- Interviewer: ‘What did you do, then?’
- Elias: ‘I went to the office and grabbed a pain killer, and rested for a moment. Then, I had to finish what I was doing’.
- Interviewer: ‘So you still haven’t told anyone?’
- Elias: ‘Errr, I’m waiting a bit, before I tell him. I’m afraid he’ll fire me, so I’m not interested in that happening’.

## Analysis: Elias

When looking at Elias’ attachment to the labor market through the lens of Rose’s concept of ‘assembling subjects’, we may ask ourselves in what manner Elias’ subjectivity is ‘assembling’ itself during this first period at the workplace.

Elias feels lucky to have a job. He is employed on a contract basis for seven hours a week. Workers with less than eight working hours a week are not entitled to welfare payments, such as pension and sick leave (Rasmussen et al., 2015). The fact of having only seven weekly hours at work, then, confronts Elias with a real lack of social and economic security. This also applies to the trial period. Elias has had a hard time finding



a job, and the amount of applications on his manager's desk convinces him that he will get fired and be replaced if his knee gives him too much trouble at work. He is subjectifying himself as replaceable, describing his work ability as if it were a commodity without much value, given the fact that so many others might deliver the same services. Because of this, it is important for him to show his manager that he is an efficient and responsible employee who after a mere half hour's instruction is ready to take on responsibility for managing the check-out counter. He does not question neither his contract nor safety issues, even though he tells me that they do worry him. He is acting strategically (Davies & Petersen, 2005; Petersen & Flynn, 2007). He is not indifferent to his working conditions but declines from demands on his employer because he does not feel that he is in a position to make any demands (Nielsen, 2012; Nielsen et al., 2013). Seen from the outside, he would seem to be in a highly precarious position at work (Standing, 2011). To him, though, the situation represents 'business as usual'. He adapts and accepts the very concrete risks of robbery, of not having a contract, of not being able to rely on having a fixed time schedule, of injuring his knee. Elias seeks to minimize his loss of value as an employee by not telling anyone about his knee trouble. Thereby, he exposes himself to carrying out the tasks that are probably responsible for the worsening of his knee condition; the handling of boxes that are, unfortunately, too heavy for him.

Through different kinds of practices, apparatus, and technologies, Elias is assembled as an extremely precarious young subject (Rose, 1989): Through the insufficient seven hours a week, his awareness of the large amount of applications on the manager's desk, the missing contract, the lack of training, the need to place a pallet in front of the refrigerated counter to avoid theft, and the risk of robbery. Put together, it all confirms and solidifies his former experience with the labor market and his own precarious position in it. In recognition of this, Elias shapes himself as a strategically acting subject who trusts only himself and who, therefore, seeks to manage individually an insecure job situation. His position as an unskilled, precariously employed worker is, during the first month at the workplace, confirmed. It is as he knew it to be; uncertain and insecure.

### **Ethnographic tale: Mike**

Mike was 16 when I (the second author) first met him at a so-called 'production school', which is a training scheme for young unemployed who has no formal education and are motivated for practical work. During the following three years, I observed him at work and conducted several interviews with him. Before I met him, Mike had already dropped out of a basic training course for would-be mechanics at a vocational training school and had, instead, started up at the production school. When I first met him, he was frustrated about not knowing which path to choose but anxious to get onwards quickly, and he soon after joined a basic training course to become a carpenter.

The year after, I meet him again at the school, where he is quite happy to be. He mostly tells me about classes, which can sometimes be a challenge to him, but as we talk about the future, he expresses his concern that he may not be able to find anywhere to be apprenticed.

One year later, he is back at the school, and tells me how he succeeded in finding an apprenticeship position but was only there for six months. It was only himself, a

journeyman and the master carpenter, and Mike had to ‘carry around a nailing gun all day, only being told where to show up next on the night before (...) We weren’t told about working extra hours until right before packing our stuff away for the day (...) and then I got blamed for everything (...) They were the most miserable six months of my life’.

He continues:

‘Well, I wasn’t very happy, was I? And I always felt in a bad way, when I came to work, didn’t feel like showing up and such (...) I was told by many to go and see the doctor and find out what was wrong with me. Most people thought it to be stress and such. So I went and, sure enough, I was told that is was stress, alright. So I tried to cope with that situation for about half a year. I can still feel it inside.’

Mike tells me that his boss reacted by saying that there was nothing in the job that would cause an employee stress: ‘He told me it was because I didn’t have enough money (...) I didn’t really want to put up with that. He didn’t consider the well-being of his employees. They are just like little robots that must do as they’re told (...) So I said “fine, I won’t be coming anymore”’. Mike stayed at home for two weeks, then went back to the production school, even though he would have preferred to work. Finding a job, though, is difficult. He tells me that he tried several places: ‘All kinds of work, from aquafarming to waste collection (...) just to have a proper job’.

On our last meeting, he has just been practicing as a car painter for three weeks. This, he explains, was a good experience, and he now considers joining a car painter training program and finding an apprenticeship position with a car painter. One of his friends is working at a car spraying workshop where Mikkel, too, hopes to find a position. Together, they have made a plan:

‘He [Mike’s friend] was fired just before Christmas, because they didn’t have enough work for him. So now he waits for them to call upon him again, and when they do, he’ll ask if they have a position for me too’.

Mike, then, strives to achieve an education, and yet he strongly feels that ‘education is next to useless’. He explains: ‘There are many with some fine bricklayer’s training, for example (...) and when you’re fully trained, people say it’s more difficult, because it’s a risk taking on new people. In a way, that’s bullshit. Because you have to take people on and let them try. So you have three months [the trial period]. So if it doesn’t work out, you’re out again (...)’

## Analysis: Mike

Mike’s story highlights conditions related to insecurity and precarity at work (Standing, 2011). On the one hand, we are presented with obvious precarity in the shape of difficulties in finding unskilled jobs, the experience of having no say and no rights during training, and the friend who is fired and left to wait for better times in the car painting business. But when looking at Mike’s labor market attachment through Rose’s concept of ‘assembling subjects’, what kind of ‘self-assembling’ does Mike go through, when ‘churning’ between education, production school, trainee periods, and being off sick?

The pervasive insecurity that increasingly seems to manifest itself as a basic condition for many young workers is clearly discernible when Mike points to education as

seeming, to him, both necessary and useless at the same time. Given the focus on education within recent social security reforms (Ministry of Employment, 2013), it seems inevitable that Mike, like other young people, must find a way through the education system, although he expects finding a job to be harder as a skilled laborer. According to Mike, employing skilled laborers in full-time positions poses ‘a risk’ to employers, a notion that further increases the feeling of insecurity that he associates with finding and keeping a job. He considers, then, both the would-be employee’s difficulties in finding and keeping a job, as well as the risk run by the employer who decides to take Mike on. This may be interpreted as Mike’s reiteration of uncertainty as a condition for both parties to the employment, a response shaped by the great pressure and stress experienced by Mike in the processes of precarisation that, in turn, shape him. This ethnographic tale shows how young workers like Mike take on responsibility for managing insecure labor market conditions by means of ‘self-directed technologies’ (Görllich & Katznelson, 2015; Rose, 1989).

When he is blamed ‘for everything’ and criticized by his employer, never being told in advance what to do and when, he gets worse every day before finally going to see the doctor, who diagnoses him with stress. Mike, thus, seeks to manage unreasonable working conditions by getting himself and his own psychic condition diagnosed. Labor market and workplace insecurities, then, are relocated ‘inside’ himself as an individual. He now positions himself as ‘being stressed’ and not as ‘an apprentice working under precarious conditions’. Mike, though, has the courage to leave his malfunctioning apprenticeship position behind, but not without taking on the identity of one that suffers from ‘stress at work’. This form of neo-liberal self-technology happens when precarity meets the Diagnostic Culture (Brinkmann & Petersen, 2016). Rather than going to the trade union, he goes to the doctor, who localizes the problem within Mike, instead. Another such individualized answer to precarious circumstances is the plan of Mike and his friend to negotiate an apprenticeship for Mike at the car painter’s by means of the friend offering to ‘accept’ working for the firm again, in spite of his recent dismissal. This strategy may be interpreted as an individual answer to an increased labor market polarization, where youth with few or no formal qualifications are marginalized and left to their own devices (Ainley & Allen, 2010) from which position they strive to find individual creative solutions to what is, in fact, structural problems. In many countries, Denmark included, globalization means fewer jobs for young workers with few or no qualifications, and more people competing for those jobs. This happens because of a general rise in education levels (Furlong, 2015), which – as a result of increased competition for attractive jobs – makes highly educated people go for jobs below their level of education, a phenomenon also known as ‘underemployment’ (MacDonald, 2011). As Mike puts it, having an education makes no guarantee for getting a job.

### **Ethnographic tale: Maja**

Maja is 23, who is studying to be an occupational therapist and who has got work experience from earlier jobs in nursing homes for the elderly, has been looking for a suitable student job to supplement her state-funded study allowance. I (the third author) meet her on her first day at the nursing home facility where she has obtained a job as a temporary ‘fill-in’ during summer holidays.

She and some of her new colleagues are gathered in the office when I arrive at 7 a.m. The mood is a bit tense as negotiations take place over who should take care of which residents and who has the busiest schedule. They are four at work that day, plus Maja. One is a weekend fill-in, the other is a social and health care trainee, and then there are two regular members of the staff. It is Maja's first day at the nursing home. Discussions are taking place around the table; the names of residents are listed and some deleted, and at one point the trainee says: 'I can't take Mrs. Jensen, as I already have Mrs. Hansen, and I can't do both.' Neither can any of the others. 'Do you want to swop lists?' says one of the regular staff, seemingly wanting to imply that she has even more residents on her list. 'No', says the trainee, she will take two, then. 'You'll just have to call us if necessary', she is told. Maja says nothing. After having sorted out the lists, the mood seems brighter. One of the regular staff, who is to take Maja along, sits down next to her and describes her plans for the day. The other regular asks about Maja's background, and Maja tells her that she is studying occupational therapy. 'Ah, well! You already know about bed lifts and all, then', says one. 'I've also done home care for a year or so', Maja says, calming her two colleagues' concerns. One says: 'You're fully trained, then!'

For the remainder of that day, Maja assists one of the two regulars, Louise. At some point, Louise asks whether it will be alright for Maja and me to tend to a certain resident on our own, without Louise, as the resident in question 'is easy'. Louise shows us what the resident needs done and which medication to give her. She also shows Maja how to check the medication chart, to make sure the right medication is given. Later, she explains, this needs to be registered, which she will help Maja do.

Maja later tells me, that she tended to the same resident on her own again the following day, 'and so there I was alone and had to check whether I had the right pills in my bag'. She 'felt it was wrong' for her to be giving medication to a resident, and the trainee had agreed that it was 'probably not too smart'. Maja reasoned, during the interview, that 'I was lucky that it was only that one resident'.

She wonders why the care center employed her: 'They weren't interested in me, they just needed someone to relieve them, and then said 'she'll do''. When I interview her after a couple of days, she tells me that she has become aware that she does not want to be 'just another resource of that kind'. A few months later, Maja wrote to me and told me that she had quit the job, because of communication difficulties.

Maja had been taken in as fill-in on call, but to her surprise the manager of the nursing home had put her on duty all weekends. Maja, needing a more stable income than that provided by her fill-in shifts, had, in the meantime, obtained stable weekend shifts at another workplace. As only working every second weekend at the center was not possible, she had asked her manager if she could still work there during holidays, now that she could not do weekends. Maja did not want to '(...) risk showing up at 7 a.m. only to be told that "no, you no longer work here"'.

She received no answer, though. The manager later tells me that she feels sorry about the resignation but has not yet answered Maja's latest email. When I ask why, she says that 'there's no future in that (...) she [Maja] is being evasive, when she merely sends me an email, and we don't need, quite frankly, that kind of employees here'. The manager recognizes it to be harsh, but they do not have trial periods for temporary workers: 'It's about finding out whether they have the skills that they claim to have. That they get to know their way around here and adjust to the routines of the place', she says.

## Analysis: Maja

Maja's current circumstances may aptly be described as a transitory period. To ensure her future adult life, Maja enters the temporary workers' labor market, expecting it to offer her experience that she may later profit from. At the same time, the fill-in job is an economic necessity and, as illustrated by the tale above, this implies various kinds of precarization (Augustsson, 2012). Conditions are, as it is, that there are not sufficient resources to train temporary workers to carry out work at the professional level of their trained colleagues. While health care work at, for example, nursing homes, is increasingly being economically rationalized, the hiring of temporary unskilled workers to cover holidays and weekends is maintained. This structural dilemma is, in this case example, addressed by hiring a temporary worker with relevant experience from other jobs. In that way, the structural challenges of the labor market are individualized to become, instead, the new fill-in's individual problem (Standing, 2011; Scheuer, 2011).

Maja is positioned by her new colleagues as 'almost trained', which implies that her individual strategy of presenting employers with attractive work experience is recognized and legitimized by her colleagues. In practice, however, this positive 'valuation' contains aspects of insecurity. The positioning of Maja as 'trained' means that Maja's individual experience and skills are thought sufficient for her to take on responsibility, but while she can indeed take care of, for example, residents' basic needs and routines in the morning, she lacks the professional knowledge and qualifications that goes with it; Maja does not have the qualification to give medication or to register the use of it, and yet she is expected to do so.

According to Rose (1989), exploring subjectivities is exploring the practices, apparatuses, and technologies, through which subjects understand themselves. We view the process above as processes of subjectification, which is assembling Maja as a precarious subject. Within this, she is balancing out the borders between informal and legal responsibilities, and the risk of making mistakes that put residents' health at stake. In a precarious job context, where employment conditions are blurred and discursive practice at the workplace has it that 'we are all busy and must each help out as best we can', giving medication is considered a not too complicated assignment, suitable for the, after all, not wholly inexperienced Maja. And Maja, having been positioned as 'almost fully trained' and wanting to maintain the legitimacy of this 'assembled subjectivity' (Rose, 1989), carries out the job. Risk is transferred to Maja, who handles it individually. Her colleagues are not likely to deny helping her; they might even respect her the more in the long term if she was asking for their help when relevant.

But Maja's precarious situation leads her to act strategically (Davies & Petersen, 2005; Petersen & Flynn, 2007) in the short-term perspective, because this is what is, seemingly, expected of her in the situation. Having been 'granted' the position of 'almost fully trained' is so important to her in relation to her employment at the nursing home that she chooses to ignore her factual position as one who needs occasional guidance and introduction to important knowledge. Being responsible for giving medication becomes part of Maja's subjectification, she positions herself as an experienced temporary worker and efficient colleague who knows the job. At the same time, the case example shows how difficult it is for Maja to actually turn her former experience into a more secure position at the nursing home. When she falls out with the management, she is promptly

categorized as having ‘no future here’ and as someone who can easily be replaced. Not because of any lack of experience, but because she is not willing to accept the conditions offered.

The employment (and her dismissal) as a temporary worker becomes part of a process of precarization in which Maja now needs to look, again, for a new fill-in position to support her in the short term. In a future perspective, there seems to be no obvious strategies for securing a stable attachment to the labor market. Maja, however, tells me that when she finishes her studies, her experience from the temporary workers’ labor market will make it easier for her to find stable employment.

## Conclusion

With a starting point in Rose’s concept of ‘assembling subjects’, the analyses show how contextual and situated processes of precarization – involving different kinds of insecurity, unpredictability, and risk – contribute to the subjectification of three young workers. At the same time, the analyses show how uncertainties and risks are endemic to youth in transition, and how this condition interplays with specific precarisation processes at workplaces. The analyses show three different youngsters in three different work situations, where precariousness is produced in different ways. But in reading across cases, we may point out the common denominators of the precarization processes that constitute these young persons as subjects. Here, we would like to address three general points, related to the ‘replaceability’, ‘individualisation’, and ‘shortsightedness’. These are empirical generated through the analysis of the three ethnographic tales and inspired by the theoretical framework used in the article.

First, a cross-case analysis shows that all three interviewees are conscious of the fact that they are replaceable at work. This is observable, when Elias describes the ‘big pile’ of job applications on his boss’ desk, when Mike describes the employment of skilled workers at his workplace as ‘a gamble’, and when Maja, overnight, goes from being ‘nearly fully trained’ to having ‘no future’ at her workplace.

The labor of these young people is used for cheap and flexible ‘work on-demand’ – as seen from the employer’s perspective. They are an unskilled, low-pay, flexible, part-time labor force on a labor market, which increasingly demands such labor resources. It is relevant to ask whether young workers, in particular, experience the negative consequences of such a labor market, or whether the issue is more about the conditions for unskilled workers in an underregulated labor market sector, where many young workers tend to seek employment. What we point to in this article is some of the consequences of being ‘labor market buffers’ and the experiences of being replaceable, this theme is observable in all three cases. Insecure and flexible forms of employment are also common among the highly educated (Rasmussen & Håpnes, 2012) and among other age groups, but young people remain overrepresented, as described above. In the cases above, all three interviewees perceive that their labor force is primarily regarded and valued as a commodity, and this shapes their processes of subjectification in different ways. All three of them have experienced how their labor force may, without warning, be replaced by someone else, capable of delivering the same kind of work, regardless of their specific work experience and subjectivity. The implications of this condition spill into their perspectives on life and subjectification



as young adults. They all, each in their own way, evaluate and shape themselves with an eye upon increasing their labor market value (Davies & Petersen, 2005; Petersen & Flynn, 2007).

Second, the three cases show that an individualization of precarious conditions is taking place, in which young workers take on individual responsibility for finding ways around the uncertainties and risks confronting them. They feel that they have to ‘earn’ an unskilled job or a trainee position, by being ready to take on tasks that they are not – in different ways – comfortable with or that pose a safety hazard to them. They internalize precarious conditions and take individual responsibility for handling them, without the certainty of seeing their safety and job security addressed by employers or coworkers. Elias does this by neglecting the risk of his knees being overburdened; Mike ‘translates’ precarious conditions into a state of personal stress; and Maja assumes responsibility for handling a job that may potentially put other people’s health at risk. They do so in the permanent shadow of potential replacement, allowing the demands of precarious conditions to influence their view upon themselves as responsible subjects. In that way, the article demonstrates how different kinds of precarious working arrangements can be seen as powerful technologies in the shaping of young people’s subjectivities (cf. Rose, 1989).

Third, a cross-case analysis points to a high degree of shortsightedness in these young workers’ lives (cf. Standing, 2011), which does not take into account the negative consequences of insecure employment for later transition on the labor market. Here, we approach the discussion of whether the uncertainties and risks experienced by young workers are limited mainly to the transitions of youth or do in fact reach into later adulthood, as well.

The analyses suggest that the three precariously employed youths appear not to be considered by their employers as long-term and thus profitable objects of investment, at least not when we observe precarization from young workers’ point of view (Kallenberg, 2009). They all experience uncertain contractual relations, job insecurity, and inadequate job training. This means to them that they must handle labor market insecurity on an individual basis by means of short-term solutions. This situation, in turn, has potential long-term effects on their lives. To Mike, his churning between education, work, and different employment schemes has already laid hold of several years and entails a risk of becoming a permanent condition if he does not find an apprenticeship (Standing, 2011). To young workers in the midst of establishing independent adulthood, not being able to control and plan – economically or socially – their own future is an extremely difficult position to be in, implying also the lack of a sense of personal progress. This is true for all age groups, but especially so for soon-to-be-adults. At the same time, however, ‘young employees’ is a highly heterogeneous category (Nielsen *et al.*, 2013), in which the risk of getting stuck in precarious employment seems higher to already marginalized groups on the labor market and within the education system, represented here by Mike and Elias (Nielsen & Dyreborg, 2015). There is a risk of these youths remaining permanently in a precarious situation, because their jobs do not offer the long-term career opportunities that might drive future transitions (Roberts, 2010, 2013) but imply, rather, stagnation and a lack of professional progress. Mike and Elias are in different ways less advantaged young adults. MacDonald argues that for ‘less advantaged young adults (...) precarious employment can be a serious and lasting affair that comes to define their labour market transitions and outcomes’ (MacDonald,

2015, p. 5). But he also argue that ‘even for better off young adults, including students and graduates, precarious work post-graduation is increasingly not a matter of life-style choice’ (Ibid).

In this article, Elias and Maja have lost faith in the will and ability of others to help them progress on the labor market, and both put their trust in education to achieve a more secure and stable employment situation in the future. However, should the development described in the present paper hold true, neither they nor we may rest assured that education will, indeed, ensure their future on the labor market. There is a marked similarity between the kind of flexible labor resources increasingly in demand on the current labor market and the kinds of jobs that young workers have traditionally held. This may imply that the above described processes of precarization among young workers may continue into adulthood, as a result of work-on-demand and part-time jobs becoming less tied to a flexible young workers’ labor market and more common among all age groups.

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## End notes

- <sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article, titled: 'Uden sikkerhedsnet. Prekarisering blandt unge på kanten af arbejdslivet', was published in Danish in the journal 'Tidsskrift for Arbejdsliv', 19. Årg., nr. 1, 2017.
- <sup>2</sup> In the present paper, the employee's perspective contributes to a definition of precarity in which the concept is not solely related to employment but also to the more general consequences of precarious work for young people's lives and living conditions, as seen from their own point of view.