

# Adjusting to new employment landscapes: Consequences of precarious employment for young Australians

The Economic and  
Labour Relations Review  
2019, Vol. 30(2) 222–240  
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DOI: 10.1177/1035304619832740  
journals.sagepub.com/home/elrr



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## Abstract

As economies transition from industrial to post-industrial, the types of jobs available and employment conditions change. Research indicates that youth employment has been negatively impacted by these changes. For young people seeking to enter the labour market, particularly those combining employment and study, precarious employment has become the norm. However, precarious employment is, for many, no longer a stepping stone on the path to permanent employment. Many young Australians, even those with higher education qualifications, experience prolonged periods of precarious employment. To examine how new employment landscapes are experienced by young workers, we conduct analysis of data collected by the Life Pattern Project, a longitudinal mixed-methods study. Our results show that precarious employment is related to lower levels of job satisfaction and autonomy in young adulthood.

**JEL Codes:** J20, J28, J41

## Keywords

Autonomy, job satisfaction, precarious employment, young adults

## Introduction

A variety of recent research studies affirm that precarious employment is viewed as the new ‘normal’ in the labour market landscape, particularly for young workers (Alberti et al., 2018; Mortimer et al., 2016; Rubery et al., 2018). Precarity in the labour market is

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underpinned by the spread of casual work, part-time jobs and fixed-term contract employment. In Australia, despite more than two decades of continuous economic growth, the economy is characterised by concerning levels of unemployment and underemployment for young workers. Within the labour market, young people are particularly vulnerable and risk becoming trapped in an unemployment–underemployment cycle, churning between unemployment and insecure employment (Cebulla and Whetton, 2017; Furlong et al., 2017; McDonald, 2011). Given that the terms insecure employment, precarious employment and contingent employment refer to employment that is not secured by a permanent contract (Buddelmeyer et al., 2015), we use the terms interchangeably in this article. Precarious employment typically involves irregular hours and earnings with no guarantee as to the longevity of the contract. Although there are various definitions of underemployment, we regard the underemployed as those who are working part-time and wanting to work more hours rather than those who are employed in a job that is not commensurate with their knowledge, skills and experience (Heyes et al., 2017).

Previous research indicates that experiencing unemployment and/or underemployment during adolescence and young adulthood has a scarring effect on levels of happiness and earnings across the life course (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011). There is also evidence that precarious employment is associated with low levels of job satisfaction, a worker's perception of the 'overall goodness of their job' (Kalleberg, 2011: 164; see also Wilczyńska et al., 2016). Job satisfaction is a key component of well-being with those who are unhappy at work being more likely to be unhappy in other spheres of life (Heyes et al., 2017).

Precarious employment is also associated with lower levels of autonomy or personal control due to the impossibility of guaranteeing continuity in access to the social, material and emotional resources that underpin positive well-being (Glavin, 2013; McGann et al., 2016). Not having secure employment and stable earnings is associated with lower levels of autonomy, which in turn is associated with less confidence in one's ability to adapt to changes in circumstances and to recover from negative life events such as involuntary job loss and economic hardship (Clench-Aas et al., 2017; Glavin, 2013; McGann et al., 2016; Pearlin et al., 2007). Levels of autonomy are particularly important during the period that young adults seek to establish their independence from their parents.

In this article, we build on the extant literature by examining the associations between precarious employment, job satisfaction and levels of autonomy using longitudinal rather than cross-sectional data and utilising a mixed-methods design. Taking Campbell and Price's (2016) view that the concepts of precarious work and precarious workers are not necessarily synonymous, we distinguish between the impact of precarious employment within the sphere of work (as measured by levels of job satisfaction) and outside the sphere of work (as measured by levels of autonomy). This article is structured as follows: in the next section, we provide an overview of the context for the study, including a description of the rise of youth underutilised labour, before analysing the relevance of job satisfaction and levels of autonomy in the context of precarious work. We then introduce our data and methods before reporting the results of our analysis of the impact of precarious employment on youth lives. In the final sections, we discuss our findings and provide some concluding remarks on how precarious work affects job satisfaction and

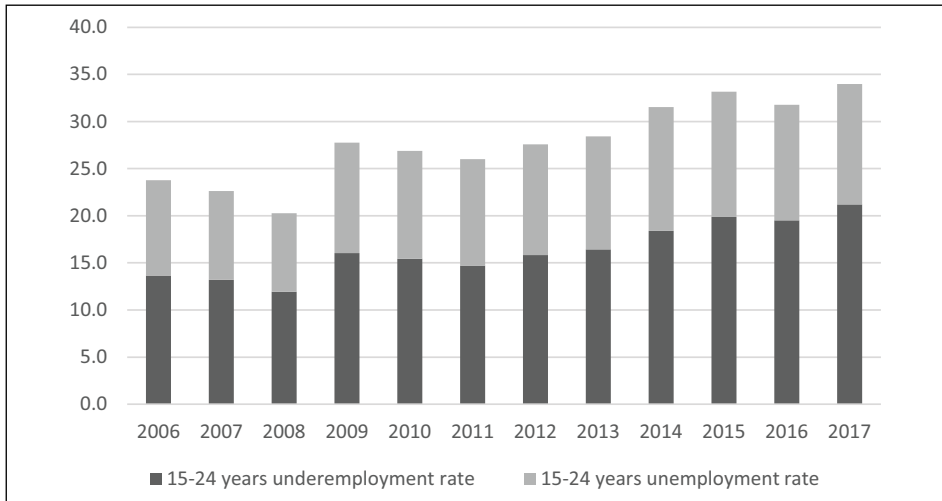
levels of autonomy for youth. Ultimately, we argue that being engaged in precarious work over time is not only detrimental to a young worker's job satisfaction and employment conditions but also has significant repercussions in other spheres of life such as personal relationships, well-being and planning for the future.

### ***Background to the study***

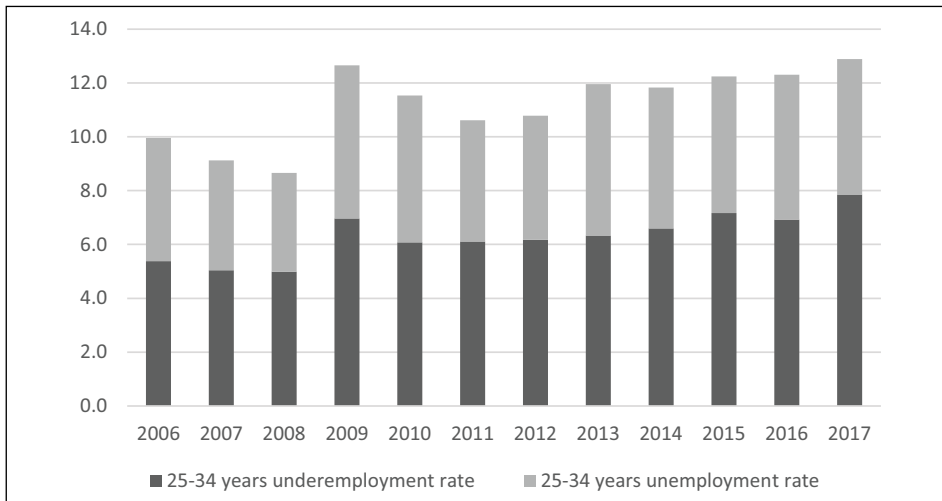
In recent decades, entry-level positions have become increasingly scarce and are more likely to be jobs with unpredictable hours and earnings (Hardgrove et al., 2015). As Furlong et al. (2017) note, the restructuring of labour markets from industrial to post-industrial resulted in a reduction of opportunities for engaging in full-time paid employment throughout the life course as many jobs that were formerly permanent and full-time were casualised, thus providing temporary employment and variable earnings (Hardgrove et al., 2015). Other researchers argue that the careers of young people who enter the labour market during a recession may suffer long-term consequences due to the scarring effects of unemployment and underemployment (Aronson et al., 2015; Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; Gallie et al., 2017). Bell and Blanchflower (2011) found that being engaged in precarious work during the early years of labour market experience was associated with an increased likelihood of experiencing unemployment in later years, lower lifetime earnings, and lower levels of job satisfaction, life satisfaction and health at age 50.

When our participants graduated from secondary school in 2006, the unemployment rate for young people aged between 15 and 24 years was 10.1% and the underemployment rate was 13.7% (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2017a). Owing to the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), the unemployment rate increased to 11.7% and the underemployment rate increased to 16% in 2009. By 2017, the unemployment rate for those aged 15–24 years was 12.8% and the underemployment rate was 21.2% – see Figure 1. For young adults aged 25–34 years, the unemployment rate was 4.6% and the underemployment rate was 5.4% in 2006. By 2017, the unemployment rate was 5.0% and the underemployment rate was 7.9% – see Figure 2.

Taken together, the unemployment and underemployment rates indicate that in 2017, 34% of young people aged between 15 and 24 years and 12.9% of those aged between 25 and 34 years were underutilised (ABS, 2017a). Being part of the underutilised workforce is associated with lower levels of income and entitlements such as superannuation and personal and recreation leave. High rates of underutilisation have significant impacts on levels of well-being and career trajectories (Aronson et al., 2015), particularly for those who have invested in their human capital by acquiring post-school educational qualifications. Previous research shows that workers employed on temporary contracts were more likely than those employed on permanent contracts to experience churning, that is, moving between unemployment, short-term employment and back into unemployment (Furlong et al., 2017). The main factor driving high underutilisation rates is the growth in part-time employment (Cebulla and Whetton, 2017). Since 2006, the percentage of workers aged 20–24 years employed on a part-time basis increased from 31.4% to 43.5% and the percentage of workers aged 25–34 years employed on a part-time basis increased from 20.6% to 23.5% (ABS, 2017b).



**Figure 1.** Underemployment and unemployment rates for those aged 15–24 years: 2006–2017. Source: Derived from figures published by the ABS (2017a).



**Figure 2.** Underemployment and unemployment rates for those aged 25–34 years: 2006–2017. Source: Derived from figures published by the ABS (2017a).

### Job satisfaction

When workers are asked about their level of job satisfaction, they are making a judgement about how happy they are with various aspects of their employment. Therefore, levels of job satisfaction are dependent upon characteristics of the job and characteristics of the worker (Brown et al., 2012; Kalleberg, 2011; Wilczyńska et al., 2016). Although

Brown et al. (2012) acknowledge that job satisfaction is subjective and therefore, not necessarily a measure of job quality, they argue that levels of job satisfaction ‘play a useful role in an understanding of the quality of working life’, including the impact of employment on individuals’ well-being and health (p. 1008). Clark (2011) agrees with the usefulness of measures of job satisfaction to gauge how workers experience their job and working lives. Other researchers have found that employment security is vital for job satisfaction, which subsequently impacts on other work areas such as ‘lower rates of grievances, absenteeism and quits’ (Wilczyńska et al., 2016: 655). Finally, Brown et al. (2012) affirm that subjective accounts of job satisfaction provide insight on ‘different aspects of work’ that are ‘correlated with labour market behaviour’ (e.g. quitting one’s job) and are ‘associated with a range of mental health problems’ such as depression, burnout, low self-esteem, anxiety and stress (p. 1011).

On the other hand, some researchers argue that the subjective nature of job satisfaction undermines its reliability as a measure of job quality (Lopes et al., 2014). Lopes et al. (2014: 308) believe that workers’ assessments of their satisfaction at work will be impacted by their own expectations of the job: ‘while some workers might be led to expect a lot, others might be resigned to expecting little’. Nonetheless, Lopes et al. (2014) affirm that ‘information on job satisfaction remains valuable’, including any changes in job satisfaction over time as ‘reliable indications of changes in wellbeing at work’ (p. 309).

Workers engaged in precarious employment tend to report lower levels of job satisfaction (Buddelmeyer et al., 2015; Glavin, 2013; Kalleberg, 2011), which suggests that those engaged in precarious employment are doing so due to the constraints they experience in the labour market (Buddelmeyer et al., 2015). Narisada and Schieman’s (2016) research shows that workers experiencing job security, and therefore, financial security, were more satisfied with their jobs than their peers engaged in insecure work (see also Wilczyńska et al., 2016). Our interest in the association between being engaged in precarious employment and levels of job satisfaction leads us to our first hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 1:* Being engaged in precarious employment is associated with lower levels of job satisfaction at age 28.

### *Levels of autonomy*

Autonomy refers to one’s sense of personal control, that is, a belief that one is capable of exercising control over various aspects of life (Clench-Aas et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 1999). Throughout the extant literature, the terms autonomy, sense of personal control and sense of mastery are used interchangeably (Lewis et al., 1999). Researchers examining sense of personal control generally use the sense of mastery scale developed by Pearlin et al. (1981). Individuals with high levels of autonomy are more confident that they can adapt to changes in both their environment and circumstances (Clench-Aas et al., 2017), and are thus more capable of overcoming constraints and achieve their goals (Dwyer et al., 2011). The development of a sense of control over one’s life and being able to self-direct and self-regulate (Pearlin et al., 2007) is an important indicator

of the associations between family circumstances, educational trajectories and occupational outcomes.

Inequalities in this valuable psychological resource (Reynolds et al., 2007) are measurable from childhood with children from high socioeconomic status (SES) families having higher levels of autonomy than their low SES peers (Clench-Aas et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 1999; Mirowsky and Ross, 2007). Inequalities in levels of autonomy may increase over the life course as success in school translates into success in post-secondary education and then into labour market success (as measured by occupational prestige) (Pearlin et al., 2007). Different life course events, such as involuntary job loss and economic hardship, are negatively associated with levels of autonomy (Glavin, 2013; McGann et al., 2016; Pearlin et al., 2007). Research conducted by Glavin (2013) shows that those engaged in precarious employment had lower levels of autonomy due to their inability to ensure their continued access to the material, psychological and social resources necessary for their well-being (see also McGann et al., 2016). Experiences that affect levels of autonomy are particularly important during the transition from adolescence to adulthood as young adults seek to establish their careers and their independence from their families (Lewis et al., 1999; Reynolds et al., 2007).

Given the findings from other researchers, we expect that workers who do not have permanent contracts will have lower levels of autonomy than workers who do have permanent contracts. We also have the opportunity to examine whether the association between precarious employment and levels of autonomy at age 28 persist after controlling for levels of autonomy at age 23. Therefore, our final two hypotheses are as follow:

*Hypothesis 2a:* Being engaged in precarious employment is associated with lower levels of autonomy at age 28.

*Hypothesis 2b:* The effect of precarious employment on levels of autonomy at age 28 holds even after controlling for level of autonomy at age 23.

## Data and method

To test our hypotheses, we use data from the Life Patterns research programme, a longitudinal project collecting quantitative and qualitative data from two cohorts of young Australians. For this article, we analyse survey data collected from the 2006 cohort. The participants were selected via a two-stage sampling method. Initially, 77 schools across Victoria, New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania, were selected using a stratified random-sampling method. Students in the selected schools who were due to complete Year 12 in 2006 were invited to participate in the project. Just under 4000 ( $n=3977$ ) students completed the initial questionnaire during school time. In 2007, 2100 completed the first follow-up survey. The 2006 cohort are surveyed on an annual basis, and a sub-set of respondents is interviewed biannually. Like all longitudinal surveys of youth, attrition has been a challenge. In 2016, there were 535 participants. Despite attrition, the sample has broadly retained consistency in terms of location and socioeconomic background; however, women now account for 68% of the sample. For

our analysis, we utilise three waves of data: wave 3 (age 19), wave 7 (age 23) and wave 12 (age 28).

*Measures.* *Job satisfaction* at age 28 is measured using an index derived from eight statements relating to aspects of the respondent's main job: I have freedom to decide what I do; my job lets me use my skills and abilities; the work is interesting; it gives me a feeling of accomplishment; it is directly related to my qualifications; it is what I expected to have at this age; I look forward to coming to work; I have many chances to share in decision-making. The answer options ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. We took the mean of the responses to construct the index. The Cronbach's alpha for the job satisfaction index is 0.8555, indicating that the index is internally coherent, that is, these indicators are measuring different aspects of the same concept. The index ranges from 1.25 to 5 with high values indicating higher levels of satisfaction. The index mean is 3.74 with a standard deviation of 0.75.

*Autonomy* at ages 23 and 28 is measured using an index based on the responses to seven items derived from the Pearlin Sense of Mastery Scale (Pearlin et al., 1981), asking respondents how much they agree or disagree with the following statements: There is really no way I can solve some of the problems I have; Sometimes I feel I'm being pushed around in life; I have little control over things that happen to me; I can do just about anything I really set my mind to do; I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems of life; What happens to me in the future mostly depends on me; There is little I can do to change many of the important things in life. The Cronbach's alpha for the autonomy index at age 28 is 0.8343, indicating that these seven items form an internally coherent index. The index ranges from 1.8 to 5 with high values indicating higher levels of autonomy. The index mean is 3.78 with a standard deviation of 0.65.

*Precarious employment.* In each wave, participants are asked whether they are working and if so, what type of work contract are they employed on. The answer options are permanent, limited term contract, renewable fixed term contract and casual/sessional. We create dummy variables coded 0 for permanent and 1 for non-permanent (all other contract categories) at ages 23 and 28. We define precarious employment as being engaged in paid work on a non-permanent contract at two time points. Time 1 = wave 7 and time 2 = wave 12. Those who were not employed at any time between the two time points were coded as missing ( $n=3$ ). There were 66 participants who were not employed in wave 7 but were employed at some point between waves 7 and 10. We substituted their contract type for the first wave that they were employed (either in wave 8, wave 9 or wave 10). For those who were not employed in wave 12, we substituted their contract type for the last wave that they were employed (either in wave 11, wave 10 or wave 9).

*Gender* is coded 1 for female and 0 for male.

*Migrant status* is derived from the country of birth of the student and their parents and has three categories: Australian (both the student and their parents were born in Australia); second-generation migrant (student was born in Australia and at least one of their parents was born overseas) and first-generation migrant (student was born overseas).

*Highest level of education* at age 28 has four categories: school only; vocational education and training (VET); university degree; post-graduate degree.

*Occupation* at age 28 has six categories: manager/professional; technicians/tradespersons; administration workers; sales/ service workers; machine operators/labourers; and not employed. Employees in some occupations (such as sales assistants) are more likely to experience precarious employment than workers in other occupations (such as tradespersons).

The descriptive statistics of the variables are included as Table 4 in Appendix 1.

*Analytical strategy.* Initially, we examine the characteristics of those in precarious employment at ages 23 and 28. Second, we conduct ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions to examine the association between being in precarious employment at ages 23 and 28 and levels of job satisfaction at age 28 to test our first hypothesis. We include gender, migrant status, education and occupation as control variables. Regression coefficients may be positive or negative and represent the average change in levels of job satisfaction that can be attributed to change in each of the explanatory variables, net of the other explanatory variables. In other words, the coefficient for being female represents the net effect of being female on levels of job satisfaction after the effects of the other variables are taken into consideration. To test *Hypotheses 2a* and *2b*, we examine the association between precarious employment and levels of autonomy using OLS regressions. In the first model, we regress level of autonomy at age 28 on being in precarious employment at ages 23 and age 28. We include gender, migrant status, level of education and occupation as control variables. In the second model, we additionally include level of autonomy at age 23 to control for within person effects.

After conducting and interpreting the statistical models, we then include some relevant quotes from the open text comments provided by our participants. Throughout each survey, participants are invited to provide comments and around 80% of participants write detailed comments each year. We conduct thematic analysis of these data and then select relevant quotes to add insight to our statistical results.

## Results

Before testing our hypotheses, we examine the associations between having a secure job and the explanatory variables. Table 1 presents the percentage of those in precarious employment at both ages 23 and 28 for each category of the control variables. Females were more likely to be in precarious employment than males; first-generation migrants were less likely to be in precarious employment than Australians or second-generation migrants; students were more likely to be in precarious employment than those not studying. Those with VET qualifications were the least likely to be in precarious employment as were technicians/tradespersons. In terms of education, Furlong et al. (2017) also found that precarious employment was common across the educational attainment spectrum with even those holding higher education qualifications at risk. In terms of work, Kalleberg (2011) found evidence of precarious employment across all occupations and all sectors of the labour market.

As Narisada and Schieman (2016) note, job insecurity is linked to financial insecurity, which in turn is associated with relatively high levels of anxiety. Precarious workers worry about their ability to afford food, housing and other basic necessities of life. When



**Table 1.** Percentages of those in long-term precarious employment.

N = 532	Precarious employment
Gender	%
Male	15
Female	23
Migrant status	
Australian	20
2nd generation migrant	21
1st generation migrant	18
Highest level of education at age 28	
School only	20
VET	14
University degree	21
Post-grad. Degree	28
Occupation at age 28	
Manager/professional	21
Trade/technician	8
Administration	17
Sales/service	25
Machinery operator/labourer	17

VET: vocational education and training.

we asked respondents about the effects of their working conditions, recurring themes from those in precarious employment were their inability to spend time with their families and friends, the stress of living week-to-week and their inability to make meaningful plans.

The following participants were all in precarious work at the ages of 23 and 28. In the open text questions of the survey, several participants referred to the stress caused by being in precarious work over a period of time. For example, this female participant, with a graduate diploma and working as a public servant, stated that ‘the uncertainty in not being a permanent employee can be stressful’, while another female, with a bachelor’s degree working as a museum administrator, affirmed: ‘My casual working conditions do not provide a continuous, stable income and this is stressful’. Other participants commented on how precarious and unstable employment gets in the way of planning and enjoying a life outside work:

My life schedule is dictated by my work. It makes me too tired or doesn’t leave me time to do the other things I need or want to do, like socialise, study, or do housework. [Female, with a post-graduate degree, working as a doctor]

There is some stress not knowing whether or not I will have a job next year. This makes it really difficult to make plans for your life, travel and relationships. [Female, with a bachelor degree, working as an occupational therapist]

The comments expressed by participants resonate with Wilson and Ebert’s (2013) argument that ‘job precarity translates into social precarity’ (p. 275). Experiencing job

insecurity, and particularly over an extended period of time, places young adults in a state of ‘individual and social vulnerability and distress’ (Wilson and Ebert, 2013: 263), fragmenting their social and personal relationships (Woodman, 2013), and affecting the possibility to plan their immediate and long-term futures.

*Hypothesis 1: Being engaged in precarious employment is associated with lower levels of job satisfaction at age 28.*

To examine the association between precarious employment and job satisfaction, we construct three models and present the results in Table 2. In Model 1, we include highest level of education at age 28, gender and migrant status as control variable. Precarious employment is negatively associated with job satisfaction. Of the control variables, having a post-graduate degree is positively associated with job satisfaction and being a second-generation migrant is associated with lower levels of job satisfaction. In the second model, we replace education with occupation, again finding that precarious employment is associated with lower levels of job satisfaction. Those employed in managerial/professional or technical/trade occupations reported higher levels of job satisfaction. These results are repeated when we include education and occupation in the final model. Other researchers have also found that levels of job satisfaction are related to permanency of job contract, concluding that precarious employment disempowers and disenfranchises young people (Furlong et al., 2017; Narisada and Schieman, 2016).

This association between precarious work and lower levels of job satisfaction was also apparent in the comments that participants made in the open text sections of the survey. For example, when respondents were asked: ‘How do your working conditions affect you?’, many made a direct link between their precarious employment and their low levels of job satisfaction. This female participant, with a VET certificate III and working as a sales assistant, affirmed that her working conditions ‘stress me out, it’s not hard work and I don’t hate it but it is just the uncertainty of shifts and lack of’. Other participants, also in insecure work at ages 23 and 28, were more forceful when it came to describing the impact of working conditions related to job satisfaction:

I hate my current job and it makes me feel stressed and sick. I want to leave but I need money and I'm finding it hard to get another job that I would actually enjoy or at least like. [Female, with a VET certificate V, working as a dental assistant]

Over the past few years I have had uncertain and very negative work experiences... It is very unsettling working in a temporary position, it makes me worry about finding stability. [Female, with a bachelor degree, working as a school teacher]

As different studies report, job satisfaction remains a useful piece of information in everyday work experiences for individuals (see Brown et al., 2012; Lopes et al., 2014). Job satisfaction has important economic implications (e.g. job turnover, productivity) as well as significant impacts on individual well-being (Long, 2005). Participants’ comments reveal the impact that insecurity at work has on job satisfaction. In consonance with the literature, uncertainty on job tenure and other conditions at work functions as a modifier of

**Table 2.** Association between precarious employment and levels of job satisfaction.

Job satisfaction	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
Precarious employment						
No (ref.)						
Yes	-0.22**	0.08	-0.19*	0.07	-0.19**	0.07
Gender						
Male (ref.)						
Female	-0.07	0.07	-0.03	0.07	-0.03	0.07
Migrant status						
Australian (ref.)						
2nd generation migrant	-0.15*	0.07	-0.14*	0.07	-0.14*	0.07
1st generation migrant	-0.16	0.16	-0.14	0.15	-0.15	0.15
Highest Education						
School only (ref.)						
VET qualification	-0.05	0.11			0.02	0.10
University degree	0.19	0.10			0.08	0.09
Post-grad. Degree	0.27*	0.11			0.07	0.10
Occupation						
Manager/professional			0.73***	0.08	0.72***	0.09
Trade/technician			0.52***	0.13	0.55***	0.13
Administration (ref.)						
Sales/service			0.12	0.11	0.13	0.11
Machinery op./labourer			-0.18	0.18	-0.16	0.18
Constant	3.77***	0.10	3.38***	0.10	3.34***	0.12
n =	523		523		523	
Adj. R-squared	0.0431		0.2053		0.2024	

Missing categories included in regression but coefficients not reported.

VET: vocational education and training.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ .

job satisfaction with those lacking security experiencing greater feelings of dissatisfaction in the workplace (see Narisada and Schieman, 2016). Job insecurity is also identified by participants in our study as a potent source of stress, particularly for participants who have experienced precarious employment over an extended period of time.

*Hypothesis 2a: Being engaged in precarious employment is associated with lower levels of autonomy at age 28.*

*Hypothesis 2b: The effect of precarious employment on levels of autonomy at age 28 holds even after controlling for level of autonomy at age 23.*

To examine the association between precarious employment and levels of autonomy, we construct two models. The first model tests *Hypothesis 2a* and the second model tests

*Hypothesis 2b.* The results for Model 1, presented in Table 3, show that precarious employment is negatively associated with levels of autonomy, net of gender, migrant status, level of education and occupation. Thus, *Hypothesis 2a* is confirmed. Of the control variables, being a second-generation migrant is associated with lower levels of autonomy, net of the other factors. In line with previous research, having a university degree is associated with higher levels of autonomy. Research conducted by Glavin (2013) also showed that levels of autonomy are linked to security of employment and that job stress is linked to feelings of powerlessness.

In the second model, we include level of autonomy at age 23 finding that as level of autonomy at age 23 increases, level of autonomy at age 28 increases. There continues to be a negative association between job security and level of autonomy at age 28. In other words, after controlling for within person variation, precarious employment has a negative effect on levels of autonomy, providing evidence in support of *Hypothesis 2b*. After including levels of autonomy at age 23 in the model, migrant status is no longer a predictor of levels of autonomy at age 28; however, holding a university degree or post-graduate degree continues to be independently associated with level of autonomy.

Experiencing a lack of autonomy featured strongly in the comments that our participants made in the open text section of the survey. When respondents were asked: ‘How do your working conditions affect you?’, many of those engaged in precarious employment reported the effect that insecure work had on their autonomy, that is, their sense of control over meaningful aspects of their lives. This male participant, with a post-graduate degree and working as a doctor and engaged in insecure work at ages 23 and 28, stated that ‘it makes it very difficult to plan your life and activities beyond 3 months, which is the standard length of roster given to us at any one time’. Other participants also commented on the lack of control of their life due to uncertainty at work:

My working conditions make it very difficult to plan my life outside of work. My shifts are often irregularly scheduled and so I can't develop a routine for things like exercise. [Female, with a post-graduate degree, working as a doctor, engaged in precarious work at ages 23 and 28].

My casual job has me working weekends and nights. This affects me as I don't get to spend as much time as I like relaxing or with family/friends. [Female, with a bachelor degree, working in marketing, engaged in precarious work at ages 23 and 28].

Other participants commented on how precarious employment and working long hours impacted on their autonomy and sense of personal control over different aspects of their lives. For instance, this participant, with a post-graduate degree, working as a doctor and in precarious work at ages 23 and 28, affirmed that her long working weeks (more than 60 hours a week) meant that she had that ‘very little time for self-care, catching up with friends and family and engaging in regular exercise and preparing good meals’. At the time of the survey, she was under a ‘one-year renewable contract’, which she found

unnerving to have to continually apply for new positions every year especially because we have to get references organised within the first 6 months of our job in order to apply. There is also the ongoing issue of there being more trained doctors than positions in Victoria. It is very stressful to know that despite 10 years of university study I may not be able to secure a job.

**Table 3.** Association between precarious employment and levels of autonomy.

Autonomy age 28	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
Autonomy age 23			0.49***	0.04
Precarious employment				
No (ref.)				
Yes	-0.25***	0.07	-0.20**	0.06
Gender				
Male (ref.)				
Female	-0.09	0.07	-0.02	0.06
Migrant status				
Australian (ref.)				
2nd generation migrant	-0.14*	0.07	-0.08	0.06
1st generation migrant	0.02	0.14	0.07	0.13
Highest education				
School only (ref.)				
VET qualification	0.01	0.10	0.05	0.09
University degree	0.17	0.10	0.20*	0.08
Post-grad. Degree	0.19	0.11	0.22*	0.09
Occupation				
Manager/professional	0.16	0.09	0.07	0.08
Trade/technician	0.18	0.13	0.10	0.12
Administration (ref.)				
Sales/service	0.19	0.11	0.09	0.09
Machinery op./labourer	0.11	0.20	0.17	0.17
Constant	3.71***	0.12	1.81***	0.20
n =	480		480	
Adj. R-squared	0.0413		0.2499	

Missing categories included in regression but coefficients not reported.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$

Finally, another female participant, with a master's degree in architecture and working as an architect, found herself in insecure work at age 28 and looking for stable work, which was taking much longer than anticipated. This participant felt that

Job insecurity affects me psychologically, as it is a situation I cannot control or predict. I have done everything I can to put myself in the best position in my career, often coming at the sacrifice of my personal life, so job insecurity really threatens my way of life.

The pursuit of a professional career cost her 'a relationship' and produced recurrent 'anxiety'. The impact of precarious work on personal relationships has been well documented in the literature (see Pugh, 2015). Another participant, with a PhD and working as an academic, commented on how insecure work (at ages 23 and 28) 'cost me my relationship, it is highly stressful as I am not financially secure ... I hoped by this time to be starting a family and have a decent job and the money to do things I enjoy'. She also

commented how job insecurity affected her ability to control where she wanted to live, with the possibility of having 'to relocate' for work. This lack of control over residential matters was not uncommon among participants experiencing insecure work. Some accepted a trade-off between employment conditions and residential choice. For example:

I have the most security I have had since completing my degree in my current job but in order to get that I have had to move to a regional town away from family and friends. This is a hard but necessary sacrifice. [Female, with a bachelor degree, working as a director of an arts organisation, engaged in insecure work at ages 23 and 28]

Overall, comments from participants in precarious working conditions revealed a lack of personal control over an array of issues: from not being able to choose their working conditions (hours and days of work, length and type of contract), having to move for work, lacking control over income source, and not being able to plan in terms of relationship formation, housing stability and other future-related issues. Their comments also show that precarious work is endemic across all sectors of the labour market (Kalleberg, 2011), even those with specialised skills and high levels of education are at risk, revealing the weakening of the nexus between education and work (Furlong et al., 2017; Woodman and Wyn, 2015). Precarious work hindered possibilities to plan for the future and had a detrimental impact on their well-being. As Alberti et al. (2018) state, lack of employment and material security provoke a sense of 'loss of grip over the future' (p. 449). Thus, similar to other studies, our data reveal that precarious employment negatively impacts on young adults' sense of personal control over 'meaningful events and circumstances in their life' (Glavin, 2013: 115) as well as their transition to adulthood (Mortimer et al., 2016).

## Discussion

Due to the restructuring of labour markets, transitions between education and employment are now more complex and precarious than in the recent past. Entry-level jobs, across all sectors, are increasingly likely to be casual, part-time and/or on a short-term contract basis (Campbell and Burgess, 2018; Kalleberg, 2011; Woodman and Wyn, 2015). And while precarious employment appears to be the new 'normal' in the labour market landscape (Alberti et al., 2018; Mortimer et al., 2016; Rubery et al., 2018) and young people are encouraged to study well into their twenties (Cebulla and Whetton, 2017; Cuervo and Wyn, 2014), full-time permanent employment continues to be regarded as necessary for the transition into adulthood (Kalleberg, 2011) and for having a sense of control over one's life.

The qualitative data presented in this article reveal how participants experienced earnings variability and insecurity, variable schedules of work and employment insecurity. All these issues form part of the mosaic of precarious work to which young workers are exposed (Campbell and Burgess, 2018). The unsocial nature of their jobs emanating from the lack of control over working hours or extensions of employment contracts were powerful determinants of participants' inability to plan their social lives and construct their futures (e.g. in terms of housing stability, formation of a significant relationship).

For many young people, investing in post-school qualifications has not led to secure employment (Woodman and Wyn, 2015). Even those with university-level qualifications are at risk of being engaged in precarious employment. As our analysis shows, precarious employment is associated with lower levels of job satisfaction and autonomy. Employees with permanent employment were more satisfied with their jobs than their peers engaged in precarious employment, net of occupation. In other words, regardless of broad occupational category, workers with precarious employment contracts were less satisfied than their peers with permanent contracts. As Heyes et al. (2017) noted, job satisfaction is a key element of overall life satisfaction. Furthermore, they argue that ‘wellbeing is negatively associated with non-standard employment and long hours of work’ (p. 73). Therefore, those who are less satisfied at work are likely to have lower levels of well-being when compared to those with high levels of job satisfaction. At the core of our participants’ comments, is the problem that uncertainty of employment brings to their well-being and life. Precarious employment hinders participants’ possibility to plan for their immediate and long-term future in many realms of life (e.g. relationships, housing, leisure time). This lack of certainty has a serious impact on these young adults’ levels of job satisfaction. Precarious work entails ‘exploiting the continuum of everyday life’ rather than just the work-time, thus precarity becomes an ‘embodied experience’ (Tsianos and Papadopoulos, 2006), a ‘state of being’ (Wilson and Ebert, 2013: 175), with significant repercussions for personal lives.

Experiencing relatively low levels of autonomy is associated with feelings of powerlessness and the inability to control important aspects of one’s life (Clench-Aas et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 1999). Participants in this study experiencing precarious working conditions commented on how it affected their sense of control over important spheres of their lives: from the inability to plan for a future (in terms of relationships), to control over where they will live, access to housing stability and control over working conditions. Experiencing a lack of control had significant well-being consequences, with some participants experiencing stress, mental illness and depression. Other researchers have also found an association between low levels of autonomy and poorer well-being (Clench-Aas et al., 2017; Pearlin et al., 2007). Autonomy is a particularly important resource for sustaining good health and well-being (Clench-Aas et al., 2017).

Previous research indicates that young people from advantaged family backgrounds tend to have higher levels of autonomy than those of their less advantaged peers (Clench-Aas et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 1999; Pearlin et al., 2007) and are therefore more likely able to overcome some of life’s challenges. Indeed, we agree with Campbell and Price (2016: 317) in being cautious about ‘merging’ or moving ‘freely’ from precarious work to precarious workers. As Alberti et al. (2018) astutely argue, family resources and welfare policies have the capacity to ‘immunize’ young workers from the consequences of enduring precarious employment. However, the long-term effects of precarious employment have not been fully explored. Our contribution is that by using data collected from the same individuals at ages 23 and 28, we have been able to identify individuals who were in precarious employment for a 5-year period and to measure levels of autonomy at two time points. Our results show that being engaged in precarious employment at ages 23 and 28 is negatively associated with levels of

autonomy even after controlling for levels of autonomy at age 23. In other words, when comparing individuals with similar levels of autonomy at age 23, those in precarious work reported lower levels of autonomy at age 28 than their peers with permanent employment. Tracking these young people through their thirties and forties will provide an indication of whether a delayed transition into permanent employment has long-term scarring effects on levels of autonomy.

There are, of course, some limitations of this study. As with all longitudinal studies, attrition affected the representativeness of our final sample. Although our sample in 2016 was broadly similar to that in 2006 in terms of family background and location, men were more likely to drop out of the study and consequently, women were over-represented. Therefore, we controlled for gender in each of our regressions. In our final sample, 63% of our participants had at least one university-level qualification and 54% were employed in managerial or professional occupations; therefore, we included these variables in our models. Despite these limitations, this study provides an insight into the effects of long-term precarious employment. The overwhelming majority of our participants (80%) provided extensive comments throughout the survey. By drawing on these comments, we are able to flesh out the findings from our analysis of the quantitative data.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we set out to examine whether precarity in employment is negatively associated with levels of job satisfaction and autonomy of young adults. Due to historically high rates of labour force underutilisation and increasing rates of part-time employment, many young adults are experiencing precarious employment, which may have long-term consequences for lifetime employment and earnings as well as their levels of well-being. Insecure jobs with short-term contracts and variable hours may fill the space between unemployment and full-time employment; however, churning between unemployment and insecure employment may have long-term scarring effects on career trajectories and earnings (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; Furlong et al., 2017).

For many of our participants engaged in precarious work, the uncertainty of their employment pervades other aspects of their lives creating a sense of precariousness, higher levels of stress, feelings of powerlessness and lower levels of autonomy. Their lack of autonomy is demonstrated by their inability to budget and pay their bills due to inadequate earnings; their inability to commit to social events due to working non-standard hours and/or being on call; and their reluctance to form long-term relationships due to the uncertainty of where they will be living and working in the near future. If the transition into adulthood relies on the achievement of full-time permanent work, those stuck in precarious employment may be stuck in transition or may have to redefine adulthood. Our expectations of adult life may need to be adjusted to reflect the difficulties that young people face in post-industrial labour markets.

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank our Life Patterns team colleagues, Johanna Wyn, Helen Cahill, Dan Woodman, Carmen Leccardi and Eric Fu.



## Funding

This phase of the Life Patterns research programme titled ‘Learning to make it work: education, work and wellbeing in young adulthood’ is funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) from 2016 to 2020 (DP160101611).

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## Appendix I

**Table 4.** Sample characteristics.

Characteristic	Freq.	Per cent
Gender		
Male	169	32
Female	363	68
Migrant status		
Australian	359	67
2nd generation migrant	142	27
1st generation migrant	22	4
Missing	9	2
Level of education		
School only	76	14
VET	123	23
University degree	222	42
Post-graduate degree	111	21
Occupation		
Manager/professional	283	54
Trade/technician	49	9
Administration	82	15
Service/sales	79	15
Labourer/machinery operator	18	3
Not employed	21	4

VET: vocational education and training.