

Emerging Job Precariousness: Work Experiences and Expectations of Low-Qualified Young Workers in Switzerland

Emerging Adulthood
1-11
© 2020 Society for the
Study of Emerging Adulthood
and SAGE Publishing
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/2167696820933730
journals.sagepub.com/home/eax



Jonas Masdonati¹ , Laurence Fedrigo¹, and Robin Zufferey¹

Abstract

Based on the notion of decent work and the Psychology of Working Theory, our research aimed to understand the subjective work experiences and anticipations of emerging adults doing precarious jobs in Switzerland. We carried out a consensual qualitative analysis of 15 interviews with Swiss-born and foreign-born low-qualified precarious young workers. Results shed light on sources of dissatisfaction within their jobs, such as unhealthy working conditions and a hostile work atmosphere, and sources of satisfaction at work, such as interesting tasks and fulfilling relationships. Moreover, participants' career plans were either vague or clearly defined. These results have implications for the design of counseling interventions for emerging adults at risk of, or already experiencing, difficult school-to-work transitions and job insecurity.

Keywords

qualitative methods, work, trajectories, at-risk populations, career choice/development, employment, future orientation, immigration, minorities

In Western societies, entering the labor market is one of the most demanding developmental tasks for emerging adults (Arnett, 2006; Domene et al., 2015; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006). Moreover, the quality of the school-to-work transition and first work experiences can have long-standing impacts on people's careers (Krahn et al., 2015; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016). At the same time, qualifications become a key factor preventing them from marginalization and precarious labor market integration processes (Furlong, 2006; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2017). Understanding the situation of low-qualified young adults who experience so-called "floundering" labor market integration processes (Krahn et al., 2015) is then a crucial research topic within the literature not only on emerging adulthood but also vocational psychology and career development (Masdonati et al., submitted).

young people from ages 15 to 25 are generally more vulnerable in the labor market, with higher risk of unemployment and underemployment (Arnett et al., 2014; Nota et al., 2014). Furthermore, uncertainty about job prospects represents a source of stress for young individuals and can lead to feelings of directionlessness and disengagement from school (Kenny et al., 2019). Developing a better understanding of the challenges that emerging adults have to cope with in their first experiences on the labor market then becomes important and urgent (Domene et al., 2015; OECD, 2017). This is particularly important for disadvantaged emerging adults such as low-qualified and immigrant people (Schneider et al., 2015). To reach that goal, however, institutional and economic characteristics must be taken into account, such as the specific labor market situation and characteristics of the education system of the country where emerging adults live and grow up (Arnett et al., 2014; Masdonati et al., submitted).

Emerging Adults and the Labor Market

The OECD's member countries are currently facing structural changes generated by technical progress and globalization (Nathani et al., 2017). As a consequence, informal labor markets and lower labor standards are growing worldwide, inciting young people to accept low-quality jobs for their survival (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2017). In Europe,

¹Institute of Psychology, University of Lausanne, Switzerland

Corresponding Author:

Jonas Masdonati, PhD, Institute of Psychology, University of Lausanne, UNIL-Mouline, Géopolis 4239, CH-1015 Lausanne, Switzerland.
Email: jonas.masdonati@unil.ch

Disadvantaged Emerging Adults

Emerging adulthood is a crucial developmental stage and is considered as a period of identity exploration, instability, feeling “in-between,” self-focus, and possibilities and optimism (Arnett, 2006; Tanner & Arnett, 2016). The experience of this life stage can differ depending on people’s cultural background and socioeconomic status (Arnett, 2012; Arnett et al., 2014). For example, young adults with lower socioeconomic status may have to take on jobs—often for low wages—to provide for their families while also going to school, which in turn forces them to neglect or delay their education (Landberg et al., 2019).

Finding a career and becoming financially independent are key developmental tasks for emerging adults (Arnett, 2006; Domene et al., 2015; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006). The likelihood to handle these tasks depends, among others, on educational factors (Arnett, 2012). Low-qualified emerging adults and early school leavers in Western countries have indeed a higher risk of unemployment and underemployment (Arnett et al., 2014; Schneider et al., 2015). For example, Mitchell and Syed (2015) highlighted through a longitudinal study that emerging adults who do not have a high school diploma tend to have more working hours and suffer from financial instability. Migration also affects the ease and speed of managing to find a career and become independent. In Western countries, immigrant workers are indeed exposed to job insecurity and difficult work conditions such as physically demanding jobs with low wages (Yakushko et al., 2008). According to the OECD (2019), this is particularly true for young migrants, who experience higher difficulties than adults to access to employment and who are overrepresented among the so-called “NEETs” (people not in employment, education, or training; see ILO, 2019) when compared with their native peers.

Emerging Adulthood Within the Swiss Context

Swiss compulsory education begins at the age of 4 and lasts 11 years. In 2015, 90.9% of 25-year-olds had successfully completed a post-compulsory program (Federal Statistical Office, 2018). Among them, about one of three opted for a higher education track, whereas two thirds chose vocational education and training (VET; Federal Statistical Office, 2019b). The higher education track begins with either enrolling in a college or trade school for 3–5 years, which then allows to access universities. The VET track lasts 3–4 years, most students enrolling in “dual” programs that alternate theoretical learning in schools and on-the-job learning in companies. People who do not manage to enroll in a standard VET can opt for a low-level VET, which lasts 2 years and covers the basics of a standard VET.

Despite a tight global socioeconomic situation, Switzerland has managed to maintain a performing labor market with low unemployment rates, rising wages, high levels of training, and a declining poverty rate (Deplazes et al., 2018). The country ranks in the top three in terms of job quantity, job quality, and inclusiveness among the OECD countries (Masdonati et al., 2019). Despite this blossoming context, 2.5% of the active Swiss population suffers from job precariousness, including

fixed-term contracts, income insecurity, or underemployment (Mattmann et al., 2017).

Age and education level influence the probability of having a precarious job, with precariousness and unemployment rates being significantly higher for low-qualified and young adults (<25; Federal Statistical Office, 2019c; Mattmann et al., 2017). For example, in 2018, the unemployment rate of workers with a qualification equal to or lower than compulsory education was 8.4% against 4.7% in the general population (Federal Statistical Office, 2019a). A longitudinal study confirms that young adults without a post-compulsory qualification have a more chaotic occupational integration process, and an unemployment risk 2–3 times higher compared to more qualified people (Meyer, 2018). For these reasons, in the Swiss context, young adults with a compulsory education diploma or less are considered as low-qualified people (Federal Statistical Office, 2019a). Consequently, given that 9.1% of young adults in Switzerland do not pursue education after compulsory school (Federal Statistical Office, 2018), a small but non-negligible part of the population is low-qualified and is then at risk of precarious work and unemployment.

Like in most OECD countries, young adults immigrating in Switzerland are more strongly affected by low qualification and, consequently, by higher risks of precariousness than the general population (Marti & Osterwald, 2004). More than one of four foreign-born young adults indeed leaves the education system after or before the end of compulsory school, which is more than twice higher than the general population (Federal Statistical Office, 2018).

Supporting Emerging Adults in the Transition to the Labor Market

In general, interventions aiming to help cope with labor market integration challenges target young people who are unemployed or outside the labor force, such as the NEETs (ILO, 2019). For example, in Switzerland, diverse public measures exist to help emerging adults who are unemployed or in the social assistance system find a job or enroll in a VET program (Schmidlin, 2018). In contrast, emerging adults who do not fall into the NEET category, such as low-qualified working people, often do not have access to these measures even if they would benefit from them. These emerging adults often do precarious jobs and are at risk of experiencing precariousness in the long term, without the help of institutional supports (Furlong, 2006; Medvide et al., 2019). According to Schoon and Lyons-Amos (2016), “it is this group of young people who generally has fallen off the radar of policy makers, and who receives the least support in their transition to independence” (p. 18). This is especially the case in countries like Switzerland, where the labor market demand is mainly oriented toward qualified jobs (Mattmann et al., 2017).

Psychology of Working Theory (PWT)

The Psychology of Working Framework (PWF; Blustein, 2013) is an insightful theoretical approach for addressing work

precariousness. The PWF was indeed conceived to enlighten the role of sociocultural factors in career decisions, work experiences, and fulfillment. It is particularly adapted to understanding the situation of disadvantaged or marginalized workers. Its core assumptions are that work (1) has a major influence on well-being, (2) is intertwined with other life spheres, (3) is shaped by socioeconomic, political, and historical factors, (4) encompasses both paid and unpaid activities, (5) is important for workers and nonworkers who want to work, and (6) can potentially satisfy fundamental human needs.

The notion of decent work is central to the PWT (Duffy et al., 2016), which is based on the PWF. In line with the ILO (2013) conceptualization, the PWT considers decent work to be composed of five features:

- (a) physical and interpersonally safe working conditions (e.g., absence of physical, mental, or emotional abuse), (b) hours that allow for free time and adequate rest, (c) organizational values that complement family and social values, (d) adequate compensation, and (e) access to adequate health care. (Duffy et al., 2016, p. 130)

Beyond these rather objective components, recent research has shown that decent work also implies more subjective components, namely (f) doing interesting tasks, (g) having the opportunity to grow, and (h) benefiting from employment security (e.g., Blustein et al., 2016; Masdonati et al., 2019). Finally, according to the PWT, economic constraints and marginalization predict access to decent work, this relation being mediated by work volition and career adaptability. In turn, decent work fulfills human needs for survival, social connection, and self-determination, which impact work fulfillment and general well-being.

Based on the PWF and PWT, we conceive job precariousness as the impossibility to access decent work (Kenny et al., 2019). Consequently, we consider that emerging adults are in precarious work situations when their occupational situation does not meet the objective ILO criteria for decent work and/or its more subjective criteria—that is, when they experience job insecurity, uninteresting tasks, or the impossibility to grow through work. In line with Kim et al. (2020), however, we suggest avoiding a conceptualization of decent, respectively precarious work, as unified constructs. Indeed, “there may be types of work that provide differential access to different dimensions of decent work, indicating that decent work is not an all-or-nothing construct” (p. 2).

Current Study

Recent vocational psychology and career development literature maintains that, although being essentially conceived to grasp adults’ experiences of work, the PWT might also apply to emerging adults who are transitioning to the labor market (Kim et al., 2019). The PWT could indeed be helpful for better understanding the challenges of work integration for at-risk populations such as young migrants and low-qualified emerging adults. Moreover, this theory invites not only a focus on

people who struggle to find a job when leaving school—that is, the NEET population (see Furlong, 2006; OECD, 2017)—but also on whether the jobs they eventually manage to find are more or less decent (Masdonati et al., submitted).

Scholars have recently tested the relevance of the PWT to understand the experiences of (in)decent work of diverse adult populations and in different countries (e.g., Duffy et al., 2020). To date, these experiences were essentially observed through a quantitative lens, for example, using the Decent Work Scale (Duffy et al., 2019). Qualitative studies based on the PWT as a theoretical framework are then scarce (e.g., Kazimna et al., 2020; Kossen & McIlveen, 2018), and little is known about how people describe, perceive, and try to cope with precarious work. More research is needed to extensively understand decent work issues “from the inside” and to investigate whether and how precariousness in the present spreads over individual agency in the future (Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016), for example, in terms of career plans. Finally, only a few empirical studies have been conducted on the experience of decent work of disadvantaged emerging adults (e.g., Kim et al., 2019), research mainly focusing on the adult population.

Our study addresses these gaps with the general goal to explore the subjective work experiences of low-qualified young adults doing precarious jobs in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. More specifically, we aimed (1) to portray their current situation in terms of sources of work dissatisfaction and satisfaction and (2) to describe how they anticipate their future in terms of career and personal plans. Instead of investigating all the predictors and outcomes of decent work within the PWT, in this study, we chose to exclusively focus on the subjective experience of decent work (through the lens of work [dis]satisfaction) and on its perceived influence on future plans. This choice allowed us to understand in-depth these underexplored facets of the PWT and to address the call of Kim et al. (2019) to verify to what extent precariousness might threaten emerging adults’ “ability to feel choice in their careers and cope with various career tasks and eventually secure decent work” (p. 701). The present study was part of a larger international research project that aimed at understanding and comparing the representations of work of emerging adults in precarious jobs in several countries throughout the world.

Method

We chose a qualitative approach given the exploratory nature of the study, its focus on participants’ experiences, and its suitability to exploring emerging adulthood issues (Schwab & Syed, 2015). According to Ponterotto’s (2005) classification of paradigms in qualitative research, our study can mainly be considered as postpositivist as we “acknowledge an objective reality that is only imperfectly apprehendable” (p. 129), but also entails constructivist features, since we give space to the subjectivity of emerging adults. This double posture translates into the use of both multiple coding and consensual procedures, allowing access to the participants’ realities, and into

Table 1. Participants' Characteristics.

Name ^a	Age	Sex ^b	Nationality	Level of Education	Current Job
Claire	20	F	Swiss	Incomplete compulsory education	Saleswoman in a bakery
Maria	21	F	Portuguese	Compulsory education (in Portugal)	Laundrywoman
Lara	21	F	Swiss; Italian	Compulsory education	Kiosk seller
Marc	21	M	Swiss	Incomplete compulsory education	Cook assistant
Damien	21	M	Swiss	Compulsory education	Printing house worker; security officer
Célia	23	F	Swiss	Low-level VET	Nanny
Andrea	23	F	Portuguese	Low-level VET	Nursery assistant
Julio	23	M	Spanish	Compulsory education	Community center monitor
Hugo	23	M	Swiss; Spanish	Compulsory education	Security officer
Antoine	24	M	Swiss; Italian	Compulsory education	Construction worker
Louis	24	M	Cameroonian	Low-level VET	Builder
André	24	M	Portuguese	Compulsory education (in Portugal)	Mechanic
Giulia	25	F	Italian	Low-level VET (in Italy)	Watchwoman in a hotel; waitress in a bar
Sofia	26	F	Swiss; Portuguese	Compulsory education	Animator in an extracurricular center
Alberto	26	M	Spanish	Compulsory education (in Spain)	Mover

Note. VET = vocational education and training.

^aNames of participants are pseudonyms. ^bM = Male, F = Female.

semistructured interviews and prompts, aiming to access the way in which they appropriate and construct their singular reality.

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 15 low-qualified precarious young workers (7 women and 8 men) aged from 20 to 26 ($M = 23$, $SD = 1.77$). In accordance with our conceptualization of precariousness and low qualification within the Swiss context, we applied the following inclusion criteria: having a low level of education (i.e., a diploma not higher than compulsory education or low-level VET), having a job that does not require any qualification and considering it as the main activity, and belonging to the emerging adult age-group (i.e., between 18 and the late 20s).

Two participants had not completed compulsory education, nine had completed compulsory education (in Switzerland or in their countries of origin), and four had completed a low-level VET program. Four participants were Swiss, seven were of foreign origin (coming from Cameroon, Italy, Portugal, and Spain), and four were binational. Five participants immigrated to Switzerland during or after compulsory education: One obtained a diploma in the field of tourism in Italy, one came from Portugal to join his boyfriend after completing compulsory school, one joined his father in Switzerland after completing school in Portugal, one made a course in mechanics and had some small jobs in Spain before immigrating, and one came from Cameroon without completing compulsory school and made a low-level VET in mechanics in Switzerland. The participants' socioeconomic status was approximated based on their parents' employment status, professions, and income level. Ten participants have parents who belong to the middle class, two participants have parents who belong to the upper-middle class, and three participants lived in an economically precarious family environment. Participants mainly worked in the fields of handling, social work, or sales (Table 1).

Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis through a purposive and snowball sampling method (Schwab & Syed, 2015) by two master's degree students in counseling psychology in their respective personal networks: one of them in an urban environment and the other in her migrants' network. Semistructured individual interviews, from 45 min to 1 hr and 45 min long, were carried out with the participants. With their authorization, we recorded and fully transcribed the interviews.

Interviews Guideline

The interviews guideline was consensually constructed by the scholars participating in the international research project our study was affiliated to. It was divided into four parts. The first part addressed participants' work representations and included questions such as "Could you give me three words that come to your mind when you think about work?" The second part investigated their current work situation and included questions such as "Could you describe a typical day at work?" and "What do you like in your work?" The third part covered participants' life path and included questions such as "Can you describe your school and professional path?" The fourth part focused on their identity and future plans. It included questions such as "What are your personal and professional plans for the future?" For the purposes of the present study, we exclusively focused on the answers given in the second, third, and fourth parts of the interview—answers in the first part being exploited for country comparisons within the larger international research project. The Appendix provides the complete interview guideline.

Analysis

The analysis of the interview transcriptions was carried out according to an adaptation of the consensual qualitative research (CQR) procedure (Hill et al., 2005) and was informed by the thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research team was composed of three researchers in career

counseling and vocational psychology of a Swiss university: Two PhD students were the coders, and a university professor was the auditor. The PhD students had a short experience in qualitative research, whereas the professor had a rather solid experience and coached the PhD students throughout the analysis process. The three team members had practical and theoretical knowledge of emerging adults' career issues.

For the analysis strategy, we followed the CQR procedure suggested by Hill et al. (2005), which consists of three stages: domain identification, core ideas identification, and cross-analysis. The identification of domains and core ideas corresponds to a vertical analysis (Gaudet & Robert, 2018) and is set to capture participants' life stories globally and the context of their respective paths. The cross-analysis stage, which can be associated to a horizontal analysis, aims to compare participants and verify whether and how they share common ground. More concretely, the analysis procedure was carried out through five steps—the first step corresponding to domain identification, the second to core ideas, and steps three to five covering the cross-analysis.

- (1) The team members independently went through all the transcriptions to identify the interview sections that addressed the three domains targeted in the study, namely life path, current situation, including sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and future career and personal plans. The research team met to share general thoughts and organize the data around these domains.
- (2) The interview sections retained in the first stage were then divided into units of meaning, and the two coders reviewed two transcriptions in parallel to identify core ideas within each domain. The research team met to compare the core ideas, define the codes, and find consensus on inclusion and exclusion criteria. Based on that, each coder coded half of the interview transcriptions.
- (3) For the cross-analysis, each coder reviewed the other half of the transcriptions to derive categories. They submitted their categorizations to the auditor, and the team consensually conceived a first codebook.
- (4) Based on the codebook, five transcriptions were coded by both coders. Then the team members met to compare these codings and adjust the codebook.
- (5) The two coders each coded half of the remaining transcriptions, first independently then consensually during a final team meeting. Finally, one coder computed the frequency of each category.

Trustworthiness

Following Morrow's (2005) recommendations to ensure trustworthiness for qualitative postpositivist research, we first ensured credibility through the analysis conducted by peer researchers on the same material. We also added a description of the participants' experiences and their environment to increase credibility. We enabled transferability by showing the

characteristics of the population and the specificities of the sample and by discussing the limits of transposing results to other contexts or profiles of emerging adults. Dependability and confirmability were addressed in the description of the research process steps, which shows how we ensured the coherence of the analysis through double coding, team meetings, and the auditor's inputs. Finally, we adopted a reflexive posture and transparency throughout the research process.

Results

The presentation of the results is divided into three sections. The first section describes participants' career paths with the goal of contextualizing their current situation. In the second and third sections, we address the two research aims and present the subdomains and categories that emerged from the analysis of participants' current situation (first study aim) and future plans (second study aim). Table 2 is an overview of the main domains, subdomains, and categories, including frequencies.

Career Paths

Two types of paths brought the participants to experience precariousness—which is a consequence of our recruiting strategy. Some of them immigrated to Switzerland after or during their school years to join a family member (i.e., boyfriend, father, uncle, and aunt) or a friend and to get a job, while others, born and raised in Switzerland, accumulated difficult school or work experiences. After finishing or leaving school, most participants tended to change jobs frequently.

Migration paths. For the participants who were born abroad, the migration experience is central to understanding the precariousness of their career paths. Some of them left their country of origin because they felt they did not have work prospects. A few tried unsuccessfully to find a job in their home country. Others moved from one precarious job to another and felt stuck in this situation. Another reason for migrating was that people in participants' networks suggested that they leave or follow them, for example, André explained "My father was there . . . he forced me to come to Switzerland [from Portugal]. I came, I started to work in buildings." In both cases, once in Switzerland, their social and familial networks played a significant role in helping them to find a job.

Difficult school paths. All of the participants who were born in Switzerland experienced some kind of difficulties at school. Some of them failed, sometimes very early on and sometimes in the later part of their school path. Some have a history of rebelling or skipping classes and left compulsory school. Others completed compulsory education and began a dual VET program but interrupted it prematurely. In some cases, participants experienced difficulties in the vocational school. Others encountered problems in their training organization, often with the employer or trainer. For example, Julio explained that 6

Table 2. Domains, Subdomains, Categories, and Frequencies.

Main Domain	Subdomain	Category	Frequency
Current situation	Source of dissatisfaction	Health	13
		Relationships	10
		Working hours	9
		Salary	5
		Activities	4
	Source of satisfaction	Underemployment	2
		Relationships	13
		Activities	7
		Autonomy	5
		Usefulness	3
Future plans	Professional plans	Vague career plans	8
		Clear career plans	7
	Personal plans	Family projects	9
		Return to the country of origin	4

Note. $N = 15$.

months before the end of his VET program, he realized that his employer had not paid him during the last 6 months, which pushed him to quit and try to find a job.

Current Situation

The current work situation the young adults were experiencing entailed several negative aspects, but they were also experiencing sources of life and work satisfaction.

Sources of dissatisfaction. Six main negative work issues emerged from our analysis. The main dissatisfying element, reported by 13 participants, was a threat to their *health*, mostly physical but also mental (e.g., due to devaluation, pressure, and hard working conditions). They were experiencing this threat in the present situation or anticipating it, for example, young adults fearing getting sick in the near future. Giulia's complaint is particularly revealing:

I'm starting to feel tired now, it's been almost three months . . . my hair is falling off, I have dark circles and everything . . . and I don't know, I think someday I'm going to crack [. . .] I'll kill myself working like this.

Ten participants also stressed a hostile atmosphere at work because of bad *relationships* with colleagues, the hierarchy, or clients. For example, Maria stated, "There is no good atmosphere, mainly no respect . . . Everybody speaks about the life of the others. It's catastrophic down there." Participants also frequently addressed difficult and unfair *working hours*. Some participants reported having to work at night or during the weekend, having no days off, working 16 hr a day, or accumulating work shifts. This was the case of Damien, who performs two jobs: one as a security officer during hockey games and the other at a printing house:

If we go to X [a city in the German part of Switzerland] [for a hockey game], we are back at 4:00 in the morning and then I have to go to the printing house at 8:30-9:00, it's a little [. . .] I'm a little tired during the day.

Unfair *salary* was an issue for a third of the participants, who believed that they were not getting paid enough to allow them to live independently or for the work they were asked to do. Speaking of his salary, Damien laughs: "Compared to what we're doing, [the salary is] not huge." Some young adults complained about the *activities* they were asked to do in their jobs: They found their job content and tasks either difficult or annoying, as was the case for Marc: "The dishes, I think, it's boring!" Finally, a few participants suffered from *underemployment*, being forced to work less than they aspired to, which was the case for Sofia: "Well, for a 50% [half-time job], I think I'm well paid. But I'd like to get a 100% [full-time job] because, despite what I earn, I can't get out of my parents' house."

Sources of satisfaction. Despite frustrations and difficulties, participants' work experiences also entailed four kinds of positive features. First, *relationships* at work can be negative but also very positive. This was the case for 13 participants who, like Antoine, valued the good work atmosphere with superiors, clients, and colleagues within the company:

I know that in the company where I work, with the team, I know that I get on well. And really, there is no hassle. Even if I'm sick with 40 of fever, I'll still go to work.

Moreover, seven participants highlighted that their jobs entailed stimulating content (*activities*) and gave them the opportunity to learn new skills, as André stated,

In my work, [I particularly like] the contact with cars because I like cars. I can touch new cars every day [. . .] So, I'm already good with that; I can ride with all the new cars we have: That's what's good!

Some young adults identified having *autonomy* as a positive aspect within their jobs. They could work alone, felt that their superiors trusted them, or appreciated the freedom to have no one telling them what to do. Hugo was clear on this point: "What I love is that there is nobody on my back!" Finally, a few young adults reported feeling useful (*usefulness*) to their clients or society in general as a positive aspect within their jobs, as was the case for Célia: "[Work brings me] I would say a little confidence in myself, that is, that people are happy with me, that I was able to serve someone, and that's it."

Future Plans

Participants' career plans had different degrees of preciseness, ranging from vague to clear plans. Moreover, career plans were addressed taking into account simultaneous personal plans.

Vague career plans. Eight participants mentioned vague career plans and did not seem to have well-defined ideas about their

professional future, neither in terms of possible occupations nor of affordable education options. For example, Giulia was not able to imagine career—and life—plans, beyond rather vague projects, such as “working in an office, one day”:

I don't know what I want to do with my life; that's the problem. [...] I know that I want to do something better. I always changed... Every job that I changed, I found something better. But I don't know where I want to end up because there's no job that makes me say: “That is my passion; that's what I want to do.”

Among them, four participants simply wanted to change their working sector, without being able to clearly identify an interesting new one. For example, Hugo mentioned that he just wanted to quit the security sector to find a more stable and better paid job: “Honestly, it has helped me a lot so far, but now I realize that it's not possible to live a whole life properly in the security sector.” However, he had no idea of alternative options yet. Other participants could identify potentially attractive alternatives but were not able to define a concrete plan. This was the case of Maria, who wanted to change from laundry-woman to a job in the sports sector, without having in mind a precise occupation, “I like sports... that would be good for me. [...] whether it's coach or teacher [...] if I can work in the sport sector, that's great, for sure.”

Clear career plans. On the contrary, seven emerging adults had more precise and concrete career plans, most of them also mentioning a range of long-term alternatives. These participants shared three characteristics. First, they were able to identify an opportunity to obtain a professional certification, either through an on-the-job VET program or an experience validation process. As an illustration, Sofia, who worked with children, mentioned: “I'm going to begin the experience validation process [...] I already begun one week ago. [...] And my goal is to succeed, to get a professional certification so that I can work in a nursery.” A second common feature of most participants having clear plans (i.e., six of seven) was their intention to stay in the same work sector, with the goal of consolidating their situation and making their experience recognized. For example, Lara anticipated that she would have the opportunity to be promoted manager of the kiosk, where she was working as a seller. This promotion would then enable her to enroll in an experience validation process and ultimately have good chances of getting interesting positions in larger stores:

I'd like to take over the management of the kiosk. Because in my opinion, on my resume, for me not having a degree, that would be a big plus. [...] Besides, this might show that just because you don't have a degree doesn't mean you can't handle it.

The third common feature of these participants is the flexibility of their career plans. Either in the short term or in the long term, they all consider alternative options and “B-plans,” such

as Andrea who worked as a nursery assistant and considered studying to become a medical assistant.

Personal plans. Even though our study focused specifically on career plans, participants also mentioned life projects that they wanted to take into account when implementing their career plans. First, most of them had *family plans* such as partnership or marriage, parenthood, home ownership, and settling down. Second, several immigrants had intentions to go *back to their home country* and establish themselves, such as Alberto, who, when asked about his plans, answered the following: “Life projects... Well... Spare some money to buy myself some houses and get back home, stop working.”

Discussion

In general, our study contributes to a better understanding of the labor market integration process of emerging adults with complicated school experiences and migration background. Results shed new light on the literature on young adults at risk of experiencing complex school-to-work transitions and professional marginalization (Krahn et al., 2015; OECD, 2017). Specifically, they add insights on how emerging adults in precarious situations live and try to cope with overcoming barriers to access decent jobs and anticipate their professional future (Blustein et al., 2016; Kenny et al., 2019).

Precarious, Decent, and Meaningful Jobs

Participants' jobs entailed many dissatisfying features such as threats to physical and mental health, harmful relationships in the workplace, unsatisfying work schedules, and unpleasant activities. The picture is, however, not completely negative: Despite their precariousness, these jobs also brought along some positive aspects with, for example, the possibility of developing constructive relationships and, to a lesser extent, benefitting from interesting job content, all of which are the most frequently evoked sources of satisfaction. These results indicate that work relationships and job content are pivotal determinants of emerging adults' attitudes and satisfaction about their jobs. They confirm then that workers also take into account subjective and relational aspects when judging the value of their jobs (Masdonati et al., 2019).

In line with that, it is interesting to note that the sources of dissatisfaction refer to a lack of decent work indicators (Duffy et al., 2016; ILO, 2013), in particular physical and interpersonally safe working conditions and hours that allow for free time and rest. In contrast, the sources of satisfaction go beyond the presence of decent work indicators because they cover opportunities to be autonomous and feel useful. This observation seems to confirm the pertinence of the PWT and ILO's recommendations about the basic requisite of decent work and the coexistence of objective and subjective indicators of decent work (Masdonati et al., 2019; Blustein et al., 2016). In other words, objective decent work conditions seem necessary to prevent job dissatisfaction but not sufficient to guarantee job

satisfaction, which also depends on subjective criteria, such as the degree of meaningfulness people attach to their work.

Planning, Exploring, or Floundering

For some emerging adults, job precariousness did not seem to inhibit the construction of both personal and professional plans. These participants were not inevitably stuck with their job insecurity; on the contrary, they had rather clear plans despite their current difficult situation. Moreover, for most of them, career plans were in continuity with their present jobs, their goal being to consolidate their situation—that is, to avoid future job insecurity while staying in the same occupational field. This result seems to indicate that, despite precariousness, some emerging adults have the capacity to “capitalize” and build on their current labor market experience. This observation might be an illustration of how emerging adults are sometimes able to preserve agency within a context of strong structural constraints (Domene et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2019; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016). It can then be aligned to the volitional factors within the PWT (Duffy et al., 2016), mediating the relationship between contextual factors and access to decent work. This explanation would also be consistent with previous research on the PWT and emerging adulthood, stressing that the feeling that one has choice is associated with the feeling that one has the ability to secure decent work (Kim et al., 2019).

In contrast, other participants were not able to anticipate clear career plans, which might suggest that some emerging adults are more stuck than others with job precariousness (Kenny et al., 2019; Medvide et al., 2019). Their plans were rather vague and more “reactive” than “proactive,” meaning that they were possibly more concerned about finding a way to quit their insecure situation than attracted by a valued, motivating career plan. For this group of participants, having plans simply seemed to help relativize or tolerate their current unsatisfying situation and perceive their job as provisional. The existence of these contrasted groups confirms the diversity of paths and situations within the emerging adulthood life phase (Arnett, 2012; Domene et al., 2015; Tanner & Arnett, 2016). Moreover, it could indicate that this life phase spreads out differently not only between social groups but also within the same at-risk group. Particularly, identity exploration and possibilities, and optimism (i.e., two features of emerging adulthood) seem more constrained for those young people whose insecurity prevents them from exploring and anticipating a career. In this sense, the opposition between the exploring and floundering dynamics used by Krahn et al. (2015) to describe fluctuations during emerging adulthood seems adapted to address these two distinct ways of “career planning.” Further research is however needed to address what might explain these differences.

Implications for Practice

Our study has implications for professionals—for example, educators and career counselors—working with emerging adults who experience or are at risk of experiencing difficulties

in the labor market. Interventions for low-qualified young workers and immigrants are indeed to be prioritized in order to support a population that tend to be forgotten by policy-makers and career counseling services (Masdonati et al., submitted; Nota et al., 2014; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016; Yakushko et al., 2008). These interventions could complement the already existing measures designed for young people who are NEET or unemployed. From a preventive perspective, when young people are preparing to transition into the labor market, job search interventions should not be limited to helping them find a job. They should consider the characteristics of these jobs and the extent to which they match the features of decent work (e.g., in terms of salary, work schedule, and safe conditions; Medvide et al., 2019). In the same vein, professionals should engage in the promotion of jobs that are in line with these features and work to raise youths’ purpose and critical consciousness toward unequal labor market conditions and precarious jobs (Kenny et al., 2019). Moreover, from a subjective perspective, they might consider whether and to what extent job options guarantee a stimulating and nonthreatening relational atmosphere that fits with young adults’ interests and expectations toward work (Masdonati et al., 2019).

Interventions can also be conceived for emerging adults who are already in precarious jobs, aiming to help them find alternative, sustainable solutions (Kenny et al., 2019). On the one hand, the statement that some young adults were able to think about precise plans despite difficult circumstances paves the way for interventions focusing on strategic designing of their professional and personal futures (Domene et al., 2015). Career counselors could provide support to young adults who desire to consolidate their position in the labor market or to change to a more satisfying and secure career option. On the other hand, particular efforts are needed to support young adults who do not manage to identify career plans because they are stuck with their current precarious situation (Medvide et al., 2019). PWT-based research highlights the key role of work volition as a mediator of the relation between contextual constraints and access to decent work (for the Swiss context, see, e.g., Masdonati et al., 2019). Career interventions centered on work volition could then foster emerging adults’ perceived capacity to make choices despite job precariousness and consequently raise their agency for career planning. In both cases, holistic interventions that take into account contextual and social barriers, articulate professional and personal plans, and identify feasible projects are necessary in this sense.

Limitations and Future Directions

The main limitation of our study is the use of a purposive sampling procedure, which limited the sample to two specific and distinct profiles of emerging adults and reduced the transferability of our results. Future research should open up to other profiles of disadvantaged people such as young adults living in a nonurban context, belonging to other minority and marginalized groups, and coming more strongly from the lower social class. A second limitation is that we met the participants once,

in a given moment in their life, which prevented to verify whether and how they were able to identify and implement their plans and also to have a finer understanding of floundering career paths and their impacts on people's lives. To solve this issue, longitudinal research allowing participants' follow-up could be carried out. A third limitation is the lack of more exhaustive information on participants' profiles, such as the precise type of employment contract they had and their social origin. Future research should gather this information and use it to verify, for example, whether the perception of precariousness and the ability to make career plans vary according to specific profiles of low-qualified young workers.

Conclusion

The present research is among the rare qualitative contributions that apply the PWT perspective to the challenges of emerging adulthood. It also sheds new light on the specific issues of emerging adults who have precarious jobs and struggle to access decent work. Our results stress the existence of variations in the perception of precarious labor market situations, depending on different sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. In that sense, it seems that this perception depends not only on objective work conditions but also on relational factors and the contents of their job. This study also showed that emerging adults can be more or less stuck with their precarious situation, some of them being able to identify and engage in concrete and valued career plans despite their difficult present situation.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the input of Nadia Ferreira Coelho, Stéphanie Dinis Teixeira, Marine Cerantola, and Jérôme Rossier, who collaborated on data collection and analyses.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Jonas Masdonati  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1897-1425>

Open Practices

Data and materials for this study have not been made publicly available. The design and analysis plans were not preregistered.

References

- Arnett, J. J. (2006). Emerging adulthood: Understanding the new way of coming of age. In J. J. Arnett & J. L. Tanner (Eds.), *Emerging adults in America: Coming of age in the 21st century* (pp. 3–19). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/11381-001>
- Arnett, J. J. (2012). New horizons in emerging and young adulthood. In A. Booth, S. L. Brown, N. S. Landale, W. D. Manning, & S. M. McHale (Eds.), *Early adulthood in a family context* (231–244). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-1436-0_15
- Arnett, J. J., Žukauskienė, R., & Sugimura, K. (2014). The new life stage of emerging adulthood at ages 18–29 years: Implications for mental health. *Lancet Psychiatry, 1*, 569–576.
- Blustein, D. L. (2013). The psychology of working: A new perspective for a new era. In D. L. Blustein (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the psychology of working* (pp. 3–18). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199758791.013.0001>
- Blustein, D. L., Olle, C., Connors-Kellgren, A., & Diamonti, A. J. (2016). Decent work: A psychological perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology, 7*, 407. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00407>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*, 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Deplazes, J., Christin, T., Cangemi, V., Murier, T., Perrenoud, S., Reutter, R., Saucy, F., & Schmassmann, S. (2018). *Indicateurs du marché du travail 2018* [Labor market indicators 2018]. Federal Statistical Office. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfsstatic/dam/assets/5787300/master>
- Domene, J. F., Landine, J., & Stewart, J. (2015). Emerging adult career transitions. In P. J. Hartung, M. L. Savickas, & W. B. Walsh (Eds.), *APA handbook of career intervention: Vol. 2. Applications* (pp. 479–494). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14439-035>
- Duffy, R. D., Blustein, D. L., Allan, B. A., Diemer, M. A., & Cinamon, R. G. (2020). Introduction to the special issue: A cross-cultural exploration of decent work. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 116*, 103351. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2019.103351>
- Duffy, R. D., Blustein, D. L., Diemer, M. A., & Autin, K. L. (2016). The psychology of working theory. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 63*, 127–148. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000140>
- Duffy, R. D., Gensmer, N., Allan, B. A., Kim, H. J., Douglass, R. P., England, J. W., Autin, K. L., & Blustein, D. L. (2019). Developing, validating, and testing improved measures within the Psychology of Working Theory. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 112*, 199–215. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2019.02.012>
- Federal Statistical Office. (2018). *90.9% Des jeunes avec un titre du degré secondaire II jusqu'à l'âge de 25 ans* [90.9% of young people with a title from the secondary degree II until the age of 25 years old]. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/actualites/quoi-de-neuf.assetdetail.4282071.html>
- Federal Statistical Office. (2019a). *Indicateur de la législation: Jeunes quittant prématurément l'école, selon le statut migratoire* [Legislation indicators: Young people leaving school prematurely, according to migration status]. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/statistiques/themes-transversaux/monitoring-programme-legislation/tous-les-indicateurs/ligne-directrice-2-cohesion/jeunes-qui-ttant-prematurement-ecole.html>
- Federal Statistical Office. (2019b). *La transition à la fin de l'école obligatoire* [The transition at the end of compulsory school]. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/statistiques/education-science/transitions-parcours-domaine-formation/fin-ecole-obligatoire.html>

- Federal Statistical Office. (2019c). *Taux de chômage au sens du BIT selon le sexe, la nationalité, et d'autres caractéristiques* [ILO unemployment rate by sex, nationality, and other characteristics]. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/statistiques/travail-remuneration/enquetes/espa/publications-resultats.assetdetail.11727528.html>
- Furlong, A. (2006). Not a very NEET solution: Representing problematic labour market transitions among early school-leavers. *Work, Employment & Society, 20*, 553–569. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017006067001>
- Gaudet, S., & Robert, D. (2018). *A journey through qualitative research: From design to reporting*. Sage.
- Hamilton, S. F., & Hamilton, M. A. (2006). School, work, and emerging adulthood. In A. J. Arnett & J. L. Tanner (Eds.), *Emerging adults in America: Coming of age in the 21st century* (pp. 257–277). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/11381-001>
- Hill, C. E., Knox, S., Thompson, B. J., Williams, E. N., Hess, S. A., & Ladany, N. (2005). Consensual qualitative research: An update. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*, 196–205. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.196>
- International Labor Organization. (2013). *Decent work indicators: Guidelines for procedures and users of statistical and legal framework indicators* (2nd ed.). http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-dgreports/-integration/documents/publication/wcms_229374.pdf
- International Labour Organization. (2017). *Global employment trends for youth 2017: Paths to a better working future*. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-dgreports/-dcomm/-publ/documents/publication/wcms_598669.pdf
- International Labour Organization. (2019). *Labour market access—A persistent challenge for youth around the world: A study based on ILO's global estimates for youth labour market indicators*. ILO-STAT spotlights on work statistics, 5. https://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-dgreports/-stat/documents/publication/wcms_676196.pdf
- Kazimna, P., Holu, Y. A., Alfa, A., Tchonda, M., Pari, P., & Masdonati, J. (2020). What work should be and bring: Representations of decent work in Togo. *African Journal of Career Development, 2*, a8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajcd.v2i1.8>
- Kenny, M. E., Blustein, D. L., Liang, B., Klein, T., & Etchie, Q. (2019). Applying the Psychology of Working Theory for transformative career education. *Journal of Career Development*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845319827655>
- Kim, H. J., Duffy, R. D., & Allan, B. A. (2020). Profiles of decent work: General trends and group differences. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000434>
- Kim, H. J., Duffy, R. D., Lee, S., Lee, J., & Lee, K.-H. (2019). Application of the Psychology of Working Theory with Korean emerging adults. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 66*, 701–713. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000368>
- Kossen, C., & McIlveen, P. (2018). Unemployment from the perspective of the psychology of working. *Journal of Career Development, 45*, 474–488. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845317711043>
- Krahn, H. J., Howard, A. L., & Galambos, N. L. (2015). Exploring or floundering? The meaning of employment and educational fluctuations in emerging adulthood. *Youth & Society, 47*, 245–266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X12459061>
- Landberg, M., Lee, B., & Noack, P. (2019). What alters the experience of emerging adulthood? How the experience of emerging adulthood differs according to socioeconomic status and critical life events. *Emerging Adulthood, 7*, 208–222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696819831793>
- Marti, M., & Osterwald, S. (2004). L'emploi précaire en Suisse [Precarious employment in Switzerland]. *La vie économique, 2*, 43–46.
- Masdonati, J., Massoudi, K., Blustein, D. L., & Duffy, R. (submitted). *Moving toward decent work: Application of the Psychology of Working Theory to the school-to-work transition*.
- Masdonati, J., Schreiber, M., Marcionetti, J., & Rossier, J. (2019). Decent work in Switzerland: Context, conceptualization, and assessment. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 110*, 12–27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.11.004>
- Mattmann, M., Walther, U., Frank, J., & Marti, M. (2017). *L'évolution des emplois atypiques précaires en Suisse*. Ecoplan. <https://www.news.admin.ch/news/message/attachments/50256.pdf>
- Medvide, M. B., Kozan, S., Blustein, D. L., & Kenny, M. E. (2019). School to work transition of non-college bound youth: An integration of the life design paradigm and the Psychology of Working Theory. In J. G. Maree (Ed.), *Handbook of innovative career counselling* (pp. 157–172). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22799-9_10
- Meyer, T. (2018). De l'école à l'âge adulte: parcours de formation et d'emploi en Suisse [From school to adulthood: Education and employment paths in Switzerland]. *Social Change in Switzerland, 13*. <https://doi.org/10.22019/SC-2018-00001>
- Mitchell, L. L., & Syed, M. (2015). Does college matter for emerging adulthood? Comparing developmental trajectories of educational groups. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 44*, 2012–2027. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-015-0330-0>
- Morrow, S. L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*, 250–260. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.250>
- Nathani, C., Hellmuüller, P., Reiser, C., Hoff, O., & Nesarajah, S. (2017). *Les causes et effets dus au changement structurel sur le marché du travail suisse* [Causes and effects of structural change in the Swiss labor market]. State Secretariat for Economic Affairs.
- Nota, L., Soresi, S., Ferrari, L., & Ginevra, M. C. (2014). Vocational designing and career counseling in Europe: Challenges and new horizons. *European Psychologist, 19*, 248–259. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000189>
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2017). Transition from school to work: How hard is it across different age groups? *Education indicators in focus, 54*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/1e604198-en>
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2019). *International migration outlook 2019*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/c3e35eec-en>
- Ponterotto, J. G. (2005). Qualitative research in counseling psychology: A primer on research paradigms and philosophy of science. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*, 126–136. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.126>

- Schmidlin, S. (2018). Jeunes à l'aide sociale: accès à la formation et insertion [Young people on social assistance: Access to training and integration]. *Sécurité Sociale*, 4, 25–29.
- Schneider, B., Saw, G. K., & Broda, M. (2015). Work and work migration within and across countries in emerging and young adulthood. In L. Arnett Jensen (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of human development and culture: An interdisciplinary perspective* (pp. 554–569). Oxford University Press.
- Schoon, I., & Lyons-Amos, M. (2016). Diverse pathways in becoming an adult: The role of structure, agency and context. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 46, 11–20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2016.02.008>
- Schwab, J. R., & Syed, M. (2015). Qualitative inquiry and emerging adulthood: Meta-theoretical and methodological issues. *Emerging Adulthood*, 3, 388–399. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696815587801>
- Tanner, J. L., & Arnett, J. J. (2016). The emergence of “emerging adulthood”: The new life stage between adolescence and young adulthood. In A. Furlong (Ed.), *Handbook of youth and young adulthood* (2nd ed., pp. 39–45). Routledge.
- Yakushko, O., Backhaus, A., Watson, M., Ngaruiya, K., & Gonzalez, J. (2008). Career development concerns of recent immigrants and refugees. *Journal of Career Development*, 34, 362–396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845308316292>

Author Biographies

Jonas Masdonati is an associate professor and member of the Research Center in Vocational Psychology and Career Counseling (CePCO) at the Institute of Psychology, University of Lausanne, Switzerland.

Laurence Fedrigo is a doctoral student at the Institute of Psychology, University of Lausanne, Switzerland.

Robin Zufferey is a doctoral student at the Institute of Psychology, University of Lausanne, Switzerland.

Appendix

Interview guideline (translated from French)

Part 1: Work representations

How would you define work in general?

Could you give me three words that come to your mind when you think about work?

According to you, what are the characteristics of a “good” job?

On the contrary, what are the characteristics of a “bad” job?

Can you describe your dream job?

What does work represent to you? How and why is it important to you?

Part 2: Current work situation

Can you describe your current job?

To what extent are you satisfied with your working hours, environment, and conditions?

How would you qualify your salary?

To what extent are you satisfied with your relationships with colleagues, superiors, and clients?

How much autonomy and responsibility do you have at work?

Could you describe a typical day at work?

What kind of difficulties do you encounter at work?

What do you like in your work?

How would you like to grow professionally?

If you win the lottery, would you keep working, and why?

Based on the following definition of decent work, to what extent would you consider your job as decent, and why?

Decent work should provide “opportunities for productive work and fair income, security at the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for employees to express their concerns, organize and participate in decisions that affect their lives, and equal opportunities and treatment for women and men.”

Part 3: Life path

Can you describe your school and professional paths?

What made you leave school or training (if applicable)?

How did you start working for the first time?

Who are the persons who have played a role in your life?

To what extent does your family play/has played a role in your current work situation?

Part 4: Identity and future plans

What are the most important things in your life?

How would you currently describe yourself?

To what extent are you satisfied with your current situation?

What are your personal and professional plans for the future?

What kind of person would you like to become in the future?

According to you, what could be done to improve your situation?