

Academic Precarity and the Transition to Adulthood: A Qualitative Study of Italian Researchers in Italy and Germany

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Abstract

This paper examines how academic precarity affects the transition to adulthood among precariously employed Italian researchers in Italy and Germany. Drawing on sixteen narrative interviews, it argues that precarity should be understood not only as employment instability, but also as a biographical condition that may delay, destabilise, or weaken the material and symbolic foundations of adult status. In doing so, the article contributes to the literature on precarity by shifting the focus from employment instability to the conditions through which adulthood becomes socially recognisable and materially sustainable. Using an ideal-typical framework centred on weak identities, fragmented biographies, and risk, and grounding this framework in the interviewees' narratives, the analysis shows how precarious academic work may undermine economic autonomy, social recognition, relational stability, rootedness, and the capacity to plan ahead. Rather than treating adulthood as a fixed age stage, the paper approaches it as a socially and materially sustained position within the life course. From this perspective, academic precarity may delay, destabilise, or prevent the full consolidation of adult status across different life domains.

Keywords: academic precarity; adulthood; neoliberal university; researchers; life course

1. Introduction

Drawing on a broader qualitative study on anxiety and precarity in the neoliberal university, this article focuses on a recurrent pattern in the interviews. Participants described precarity not only as employment instability, but also as

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a biographical condition affecting their life trajectories. Starting from this insight, the article examines how the interviewees relate academic precarity to wider generational transformations and to delayed or weakened access to socially recognised markers of adulthood. The main research question is therefore: How do Italian researchers working in Italy and Germany describe the effects of precarious academic work on the material and symbolic consolidation of adult status?

Precarity can be understood as an ambivalent condition, involving both occupational and social dimensions (Murgia, 2010). The precarious worker is approached here as an ideal-typical figure through which broader social tensions become visible. This perspective makes it possible to consider how instability may affect the conditions through which adult life becomes socially recognisable and materially sustainable.

Given its culturally defined nature, the transition to adulthood can be approached both objectively, through the timing and sequencing of life-course events and demographic or occupational markers (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Liefbroer & Toulemon, 2010), and subjectively, through individuals' interpretations of their own position in the life course and shared beliefs about adult milestones (Arnett, 2000; Benson & Furstenberg, 2006; Cepa & Furstenberg, 2021; Spéder et al., 2014). The analysis moves from researchers' subjective accounts of precarity to the life domains they describe as hindered or rendered uncertain by it, including economic autonomy, residential independence, relational stability, rootedness and future planning. Although parenthood is commonly included among conventional markers of adulthood, it is not central here because it does not emerge with comparable salience from the interviews.

Adulthood is therefore treated not as an age-defined condition or as a status reached once and for all, but as a socially recognised and materially sustained position in the life course. Under precarious circumstances, access to this position may be delayed, while its consolidation may remain incomplete or unstable. This understanding of adulthood also clarifies the heuristic use of Honwana's concept of *waithood* (2012). Developed in relation to young women and men in African contexts whose transition to social adulthood was constrained by unemployment, poverty and limited access to stable livelihoods, the concept is not directly transferable to the present case. It is used here as a heuristic lens for interpreting a different condition: that of highly qualified workers who may be professionally active and assume adult responsibilities while remaining unable to convert their work into stable recognition, autonomy and a reliable future horizon.

The analysis develops this question through three analytically connected dimensions: weak identities, fragmented biographies and risk.

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Empirically, the article analyses sixteen narrative interviews with precariously employed Italian researchers working in Italy and Germany. The inclusion of Germany does not serve to establish a systematic comparison between two national academic systems. Rather, it allows the study to consider Italian researchers' trajectories both within the national context of origin and within one of the major European destinations of Italian academic mobility. A 2023 informal census coordinated through Italian diplomatic scientific offices estimated 4,644 Italian researchers working in German universities and research institutions (Brandi et al., 2024).

Italy and Germany offer institutionally distinct settings in which recruitment rules, career structures, mobility requirements and employment uncertainty are differently organised. Including both settings therefore makes it possible to explore whether similar biographical mechanisms emerge across these settings, while allowing context-specific institutional constraints to be specified where they are explicitly invoked in the narratives. National context is thus treated as a situating condition for the narratives, rather than as an independent axis of comparison or a basis for country-level claims.

Including trajectories from two institutionally distinct settings broadens the range of conditions within which the biographical consequences of academic precarity can be explored. This does not amount to a systematic cross-national comparison, but it allows the analysis to consider whether similar forms of biographical uncertainty are narrated across differently organised academic settings.

2. Precarity as an existential condition

When discussed in relation to work, precarity is often understood as employment instability and as the contractual arrangements that regulate it. Yet precarity can also be read as a broader social condition that exceeds the workplace (Murgia, 2010), affecting subjectivity, temporality and the capacity to project oneself into the future. In Berardi's terms, it becomes «the generalized form of social relations, which deeply affected the social composition and the psychic, relational and linguistic characters of a new generation as it entered the labour market» (2009, p. 125).

Drawing on Standing's (2011) notion of the precariat, Hartung et al. (2017) connect labour-market flexibility and insecurity to a condition marked by the absence of a secure identity and a clear sense of development through work or lifestyle. This emphasis on insecurity, unstable identity and blocked development helps frame the precarious worker as an ideal-typical figure of

contemporary subjectivity under neoliberal conditions, including academic labour (see Morgan & Wood, 2017).

In Weberian terms, an ideal type does not reproduce empirical cases in their entirety but accentuates selected traits in order to make meaningful patterns analytically visible (Weber, 1949). In this study, weak identities, fragmented biographies and risk are used as analytical dimensions for reading the interview material. They do not constitute fixed categories imposed on the accounts; rather, they direct attention to recurrent aspects of how precarity is experienced and narrated. These dimensions were selected because they draw attention to ways in which three conditions central to the consolidation of adult status may be weakened or rendered uncertain: recognition as a legitimate worker and social actor; continuity across professional, relational and spatial trajectories; and the capacity to project oneself into the future. Together, they provide an interpretive framework for reconstructing how precarious academic work is narrated in relation to adulthood.

2.1 *Weak identities*

Under neoliberal conditions, individuals are increasingly addressed as entrepreneurs of the self, responsible for their careers and lives. Success tends to be attributed to motivation, while failure is framed as individual fault (Miller & Rose, 2008). This may produce a fragile relation to the self. Drawing on Lasch (1991), contemporary subjectivity can be read as dependent on external validation rather than simply indifferent to others. As Lasch observes, «Notwithstanding his occasional illusions of omnipotence, the narcissist depends on others to validate his self-esteem» (1991, p. 10). This dependence can be connected to Honneth's argument that recognition is constitutive of self-relation (Honneth, 1996). Under neoliberal conditions, however, recognition is often mediated by indices and evaluative procedures that translate conduct into performance and accountability. Identity may therefore become unstable, caught between authenticity and shifting external standards. More broadly, this instability recalls Bauman's (1997) account of anxiety related to the unresolved problem of identity.

2.2 *Fragmented biographies*

Closely connected to weak identities is the fragmentation of life courses. Paths that were once more linear (Sennett, 1998) tend to become discontinuous under the neoliberal imperative of flexibility, which makes trajectories less

stable across time and space. Identity is increasingly shaped through experimentation, mobility and the continuous acquisition of skills, while the possibility of a stable life trajectory becomes more uncertain. Bauman captures this condition when he notes that having an identity for life may become «a handicap rather than an asset» for those who do not control the circumstances of their life itinerary (1997, p. 26).

Work identity follows a similar pattern. In flexible labour markets, competitiveness requires continual up-skilling, while professional identities may remain suspended between apprenticeship and fully fledged employment. Biography is also fragmented by overlapping roles and by the absence of a stable temporal horizon within which life choices can acquire continuity. As Murgia observes, work must be thought «as a flow instead of a position»; yet flow also recalls «uncertainty and disorientation» and «fragmentation and discontinuity» (2010, p. 36). Biography therefore appears less as a stable framework for self-construction than as an uncertain sequence of adjustments, interruptions and provisional choices.

2.3 Risk

Risk is a central category for interpreting individual experience under contemporary conditions. Beck (1992) links it to individualisation and to the erosion of trust in institutions, placing increasing responsibility for life trajectories on individuals themselves. Yet individualisation does not imply the disappearance of normative regulation. Even where shared values weaken, social roles and codes continue to orient behaviour (Lipovetsky, 2014). In this sense, risk does not simply name uncertainty. It may also function as a moral and political category through which behaviour is regulated and social control legitimised (Furedi, 2006; Busso, 2014). For the present analysis, risk is relevant as it shapes whether adult commitments can be made and sustained over time.

3. Methodology

The empirical material analysed in this article comes from a broader exploratory qualitative study on anxiety and precarity in the neoliberal university, based on sixteen narrative interviews with precariously employed Italian researchers working in Italy and Germany. The present article develops a focused re-analysis of this corpus, starting from a recurrent theme that emerged across the interviews, namely how precarious academic work affects

the material and symbolic conditions through which adulthood is socially recognised and biographically consolidated.

The sample was constructed purposively to avoid producing a corpus centred on a single type of trajectory. National location, gender, disciplinary area and career position informed recruitment only to broaden the range of situations represented; they were not intended to produce analytically self-sufficient subgroups. The final corpus comprises eight researchers working in Italy and eight in Germany, mainly doctoral candidates, postdoctoral researchers and early-career researchers, alongside one more advanced contrastive case. These attributes are reported to situate the accounts, but the study neither compares profiles across their intersections nor makes claims about the effects of any single attribute. Some interviewees based in Germany are doctoral candidates, formally considered fixed-term employees within the German academic system (Allmer, 2023).

The analytical unit is therefore the narrative account of academic precarity as a biographical condition, rather than a subgroup defined by national location, gender, disciplinary area or career stage. Given the limited corpus, the study does not make gender-specific, discipline-specific or country-specific claims. It instead offers an exploratory reconstruction of recurrent biographical mechanisms through which precarious academic work may affect economic autonomy, professional recognition, relational stability, rootedness and future planning.

Since the article engages with the transition to adulthood, the age and career profile of the interviewees require caution. Participants occupy different moments of precarious academic trajectories. Accordingly, the analysis does not assume that adulthood is simply absent or not yet attained, nor that delay has the same meaning across career stages. Rather, it examines how precarious academic work may delay, destabilise or weaken the recognition and material consolidation of adult status across the life course. Career stage is therefore considered only when it helps specify how precarity is narrated and how delay, destabilisation or incomplete consolidation are articulated.

Participants were recruited through personal contacts¹, the *Facebook* group² of the *Associazione Internazionale Ricercatori Italiani*, and searches on German

¹ Four interviewees were identified through four distinct mediators, each of whom provided only one contact. This process therefore did not generate a relational chain within the sample, thereby limiting the risk of overlap among the interviewees' positions, or between those positions and that of the researcher.

² On 9 October 2023, I published a post in the *Facebook* group, briefly presenting the research and inviting precariously employed Italian researchers to take part in an

university websites. The use of different recruitment channels was intended to avoid reliance on a single access route and to limit the cumulative effect typical of snowball sampling. At the same time, these channels may have shaped access to the field, the composition of the corpus, and the type of narratives collected; this is therefore acknowledged as a methodological limitation. A possible self-selection effect also remains, since those who agreed to participate were likely to be particularly willing to reflect on precarious academic work. However, the willingness to discuss anxiety, academic precarity, and biographical uncertainty emerged across all interviews, regardless of the recruitment technique used.

The interview guide followed Cardano (2011) and Mason (2017), combining pre-established themes with flexibility toward topics emerging during interaction.

The interviews were conducted between 23 September and 14 December 2023 and were mostly carried out online, fourteen out of sixteen. Before each interview, the aims of the study were explained and anonymity was guaranteed. In one case, a participant asked to receive the interview transcript. Detailed information combining age, position, institution, disciplinary field and national context is reported selectively to protect participants' anonymity, especially given the small and potentially identifiable population under study. The sample is composed mainly of doctoral candidates, postdoctoral researchers and early-career researchers; one more advanced participant is retained as a contrastive case.

Although the sample is not statistically representative, it is methodologically appropriate within qualitative inquiry. In the broader study, sample sufficiency was assessed primarily in terms of information power (Malterud et al., 2016), namely the extent to which the selected cases could produce rich and analytically meaningful material in relation to the research aims. This assessment was supported by the specificity of the sample and by the depth of the narrative interviews, none of which lasted less than ninety minutes.

The empirical material was re-analysed through template analysis (King, 2004), a thematic approach that combines analytical flexibility with a relatively high degree of structure by integrating theoretically informed and data-driven coding. Weak identities, fragmented biographies and risk were used as orienting dimensions for interpreting researchers' accounts of precarity. Derived from the theoretical construction of the precarious worker as an ideal type, these dimensions helped reconstruct how precarious academic work was experienced and narrated in relation to adulthood. The analysis identified domains in which precarity was perceived as especially consequential, including economic

interview. The post generated several expressions of interest, from which six participants were eventually recruited.

independence, job stability, independence from parental support, occupational recognition, intimate relationships, geographical rootedness and future planning. Several correspond to markers of adulthood discussed in demographic and life-course research, such as independent residence, stable employment, partnership formation and financial autonomy (Cepa & Furstenberg, 2021; Liefbroer & Toulemon, 2010; Spéder et al., 2014).

Within the template, the analysis identified subthemes such as professional recognition, publication pressure, infantilisation, dependence on supervisors, family support, mobility, relational stability and future planning. By contrast, gender, disciplinary area, national context and career stage were not treated as subdimensions of the template. They functioned as contextual attributes, used to assess whether particular narratives required specification, but not as axes for systematic comparison. When no sufficiently consistent gender-specific, discipline-specific or country-specific pattern emerged, these attributes were not developed as independent subthemes. This choice reflects analytical caution rather than an assumption that such dimensions are irrelevant. The empirical argument therefore concerns recurrent biographical mechanisms through which academic precarity may affect the material and symbolic consolidation of adulthood.

4. The precarious worker: from the ideal type to the concrete experience

The ideal-typical construction of the precarious worker is not adopted as a rigid model to be mechanically applied to the empirical material. The three dimensions identified above are employed as theoretically grounded and analytically connected categories for interpreting researchers' narratives. They function as an interpretive model of how precarious work may interact with broader biographical and generational processes. The empirical analysis proceeds accordingly: it first examines weak identities in relation to professional and social recognition; it then considers fragmented biographies in connection to relational and spatial continuity; and it finally analyses risk in relation to economic dependence and the capacity to plan ahead. This sequence shows how the three dimensions contribute to a form of waiting that is not reducible to prolonged youth, but concerns the incomplete consolidation of adult status (Honwana, 2012).

4.1 *Weak identities and research precarity*

The interview material suggests that contemporary academic precarity may contribute to the fragility of researchers' professional identities. A first aspect concerns the increasingly multidisciplinary character of academic trajectories. This tendency can be related to the transformation of the university into a more polyvalent and externally oriented institution. Already criticised by Lasch (1991) through the notion of the «multiversity», this transformation has been reinforced in Europe by processes such as the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy (see Musselin & Teixeira, 2014). Musselin and Teixeira describe the European higher education context as a shift «from an expanding sector to a mature industry» (2014, p. 4), accompanied by growing demands from external stakeholders and increasing attention to efficiency and institutional responsiveness.

In the Italian context, these transformations may create an uncertain environment for the construction of professional identity. Although multidisciplinary is increasingly important for accessing funding and participating in research projects, it remains only partially recognised within institutional evaluation procedures such as the Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale:

Today, multidisciplinary... in a European project it's an asset; for a national qualification it's a cross to bear. We ought to rethink disciplinary sectors so they fit a context that wants multidisciplinary [...] for an ever more complex society
(Nino, HS, IT).

I'm always in an interdisciplinary position... which [...] ends up being a bullsbit. To the jurists I'm too much of a jurist, to the sociologists too much of a jurist... to the historians I'm not a historian but a social scientist (Ciccio, SS, IT).

These extracts suggest that multidisciplinary may be experienced less as enrichment than as disciplinary misrecognition. Identity instability therefore concerns not only professional self-understanding, but also employability and access to institutionally recognised career paths. When such misrecognition hinders career progression, it may also weaken one of the social bases through which adulthood is recognised: the possibility of securing a stable and legitimate place in the labour market (see Blatterer, 2007). The Italian context is relevant here because the narratives refer to a specific institutional device through which professional recognition is organised.

A second factor concerns researchers' relationship to the output of their work. In the interviews, this emerges in relation to publication pressure and the perceived sacrifice of quality. For many respondents, the quality of scientific production is not simply a professional standard, but a basis for recognising themselves as competent researchers:

This anxiety that you have to publish at least one study a year, otherwise you'll have a hole in your CV, is stressful and pushes you [...] to turn out lower-quality stuff. There's this pressure to publish fast, otherwise you don't move forward, because your H-index doesn't go up (Alba, HS, IT).
This need to publish [...] lowers the quality of research. It leads you to slice one study into five papers [...] when it should be the one big paper you write over two years, something that can mark the field and stick around in the future (Marco, SS, DE).

The material points to a tension between the work through which researchers seek recognition and the work precarious conditions push them to produce. Accelerated career-building may undermine the slower temporality required for careful research, so that low-quality output rebounds upon researchers' sense of professional worth.

Unlike the previous mechanism, publication pressure appears across narratives situated in different national and disciplinary contexts. This suggests that the link between accelerated productivity and identity fragility is not reducible to a single institutional setting, although it may take specific forms within each system. Nora's words are emblematic in this regard:

Precarity itself encourages low-quality work [...]. I publish crap, but it must add up because I need lots of publications (Nora, HS, DE).

The issue is therefore not only professional anxiety. The quality of research output becomes a terrain on which scientific identity is evaluated and lived. Where recognition as a competent researcher depends on the capacity to produce careful and meaningful work, precarious conditions may undermine not only what researchers produce, but also how they see themselves and are seen by others.

A third aspect concerns the asymmetrical relationship with the supervisor, often marked by dependence, evaluation and limited autonomy (see Vähämäki et al., 2021). In some interviews, this asymmetry is experienced as infantilising (see Holmes et al., 2019) or paternalistic. Several interviewees, despite having formally completed the educational stage commonly associated with the transition to adulthood, describe being treated as if they were still students. This

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sits uneasily with the continued social salience of educational completion as a marker of adult status (Cepa & Furstenberg, 2021), producing a mismatch between formal qualifications, self-perception as workers and infantilising forms of institutional address:

*I'm not a child anymore, even if they treat me like one because I'm doing my PhD. I'm always a doctoral student, always a student. I'm 31 now, and I'm treated like a kid (Giulia, HS, DE).
Researchers are seen as permanent students... it makes me angry (Nora, HS, IT).*

The fragility of precarious researchers' identity thus appears to be shaped by both the institutional structure of academic work and the relational dynamics through which that structure is experienced. The following accounts show how this institutional fragility can extend beyond the university, becoming visible in the recognition of researchers as workers in everyday economic and social arrangements. Weak occupational status may thus affect not only professional recognition but also the social and material conditions through which adult life is stabilised. As Standing (2011) argues, precarious status entails low professional recognition. In the case of researchers, it may also weaken the recognition of their worker status and of the benefits attached to it (Bellè et al., 2017). Weakened occupational identity may therefore reverberate beyond academia because work remains a central basis of social recognition, economic security and biographical legitimacy:

When you file your taxes... they tell you that you're not working. Even when I was doing my PhD and living away from home, I couldn't deduct rent because I wasn't recognised as a worker (Alba, HS, IT).

No bank would give me a mortgage simply because I don't have a permanent contract (Vincenzo, SS, IT).

This form of social marginality may intensify dependence on parents and make the consolidation of adult status more difficult:

I might have to go back and ask my mother for money... This kind of precarity weakens and depresses you. AN ECONOMIC PRECARIITY! It weakens you even in daily life (Ciccio, SS, IT).

I had to ask my parents to act as guarantors because no one wanted to give me a mortgage. I took it out with my partner; they would have lent to him... the

fact that I was involved was a problem, and it was very humiliating (Nora, HS, IT).

The empirical material therefore suggests that weak occupational recognition may become biographically consequential. Within academia, unstable prospects, publication pressure and dependence on senior academics may weaken professional identity and produce experiences of infantilisation. In some accounts, weak recognition as workers also emerges outside academia, in relation to taxation, credit, housing, economic autonomy and dependence on family support. In line with research on precarious work, the material suggests that employment instability may hinder economic and residential autonomy (Murgia, 2010), which remain socially salient markers of adult status (Blatterer, 2007; Cepa & Furstenberg, 2021). In this sense, precarious employment may weaken the material and symbolic conditions through which adult status is recognised and consolidated. Read through the concept of waithood (Honwana, 2012), this is not a condition of non-work, but one in which work does not reliably convert into the recognition and autonomy associated with adult status.

4.2 Fragmented biographies of precarious researchers

Reflecting on their job situation, many precarious researchers compare their biographies with those of their parents, whose life courses were often shaped by more linear, stable and cumulative work trajectories (Sennett, 1998). By contrast, the accounts collected here suggest the fragmentary character of precarious biographies:

A sense of injustice. I know that [...] I will never have what my parents had: they were researchers at the CNR all their lives [...]. My mother had a permanent contract at twenty-seven, while I, who went to the Normal School, spent time abroad and completed my PhD, am still here at thirty-three not knowing what fate awaits me (Nora, HS, IT).

My mum, at my age, already owned a house and had two daughters, and I have none of that. It is a generational condition, not only due to research. Age-linked goals have shifted by at least ten or fifteen years; we do at forty what our parents did at twenty-five (Elena, SS, IT).

Elena's account is important because it suggests that the delay in reaching adulthood markers cannot be attributed to academic precarity alone. Academic

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precarity intersects with broader generational transformations, while intensifying their consequences within higher education. For many interviewees, comparison with their parents' life course becomes a way of making sense of their own biography.

The sense of delay, however, should not be read as identical across all cases. The material does not support a systematic comparison between doctoral candidates, postdoctoral researchers and more advanced precarious researchers. It suggests more cautiously that contractual temporariness may weaken or destabilise different dimensions of adult life depending on one's position within the academic trajectory. For some participants, precarity appears as postponed access to autonomy, stability and recognition; in a more advanced case, it appears more ambivalently, as the accumulated cost of a longer investment in the academic field.

At a certain point the years add up, and you tell yourself: you are over thirty. If I had chosen a straighter path, like joining a company, by now I would be in my little house with a comfortable mortgage. Instead, look at me... I really feel like a dumbass (Alessandro, HS, IT).

This sense of delay is grounded in a symbolic framework that continues to associate adulthood with autonomy, stability, responsibility and socially recognised markers such as secure employment, independent living and durable relationships (Blatterer, 2007). These markers are not treated here as universal or timeless criteria, but as culturally sedimented signs through which adult status continues to be interpreted. Home ownership, stable couple relationships and rootedness emerge in the interviews as normative reference points through which a settled adult life is imagined. As Blatterer (2007) argues, this «rupture between new [social] conditions and old standards [of adulthood]» (p. 57) can be understood as a form of normative lag (pp. 24–25).

Inherited standards of adulthood therefore remain important yardsticks of social recognition, even when the institutional conditions that once made them more attainable have weakened. In this light, the interviewees' condition can be read through Honwana's notion of waithood (2012), understood here as a liminal state shaped by the tension between culturally valued milestones and the difficulty of reaching them. This does not mean treating the interviewees as simply young or inactive. Rather, it draws attention to the situation of workers who may be highly qualified and professionally engaged, yet lack stable institutional means through which relationships, residence and future plans can be consolidated.

Borrowing Merton's distinction (1968) between cultural goals and institutional means, precarious researchers may be seen as actors oriented

toward adulthood goals inherited from the parental generation while lacking stable institutional means to achieve them. Two goals are especially salient in the material: stable relationships and geographical rootedness.

Stable relationships may constitute an important dimension of adult self-perception. Comparative research treats living with a partner or spouse as one marker associated with adult status, although its salience varies across countries (Spéder et al., 2014). In the present material, however, stable relationships appear to be made more difficult by forms of work-life interference generated by academic labour, whose temporal demands often exceed ordinary boundaries (Jacobs & Winslow, 2004) and extend into domestic life (Cannizzo & Osbaldiston, 2016). This recalls Panzieri's notion of the factory-society (1981), still useful for grasping how production may expand beyond the workplace. In academic labour, productivity may invest the individual's biography, reshaping intimate relationships and narrowing the space for non-work attachments.

I had a relationship failure [...] that I quite clearly blame on work. When you see only work, you do not realise that the other person is sounding alarm bells [...] you do not devote the time you should (Alessandro, HS, IT).

My first boyfriend was a researcher [...] he did nothing but work. I feel more that I endured this distance caused by excessive work. He had nothing but work; I felt pushed into second place (Nora, HS, IT).

Is it a coincidence that I have been single since 2014? The year I started doing research at the university (Ciccio, SS, IT).

Academic work offers organisational autonomy, yet its temporal flexibility may become a double-edged sword (Bozzon et al., 2017). Freedom coexists with productivity pressure that can turn the precarious researcher into a de facto full-time worker. What should ensure independence may become totalising, limiting investment in durable intimate bonds.

A similar dynamic emerges on the spatial plane. In the neoliberal university, mobility is often framed as necessary or virtuous for career advancement. Yet, when intertwined with precarious employment, mobility may intensify uncertainty, weaken territorial rootedness and generate biographical destabilisation (Raffini, 2017). Research on academic mobility similarly warns against reading mobility as a neutral professional resource or a purely voluntary strategy, since it may become a constrained practice shaped by career norms, contractual insecurity, economic resources, family responsibilities and institutional conditions (Ackers & Gill, 2008; Sautier, 2021). Recent research on

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Italian researchers abroad also suggests that precarity, mobility and uncertain rights can affect the construction of stable and recognisable biographical trajectories (Carrozza et al., 2023).

In the interviews, these pressures come into tension with sedimented markers of adulthood, such as settling in one place, buying a house or forming a family.

I am almost 35 and would like to start thinking about long-term stability, living in one city and staying there [...]. Precarity denies you the possibility of making long-term plans, buying a house, starting a family (Ilaria, HS, DE).

*We own a house in X, we are putting down roots in this city, so the idea of upsetting our plans spatially worries me, as does having to pay rent somewhere else (Evelina, SS, IT).
Everything always feels temporary, so you never bother to furnish your room. You never do anything that makes you feel at home. You always feel in transit (Marco, SS, DE).*

What bothers me most is the number of moves I have done. [...] I feel I am losing what matters in my life, with no stable reference points left (Nora, HS, IT).

These accounts suggest that mobility does not simply imply relocation. It may also hinder the consolidation of adulthood through durable residence, investment in a home, routines and imagined continuity. Rootedness therefore appears not as a merely residential fact, but as a socially meaningful condition for adult status. In these accounts, national context becomes relevant primarily through mobility, residential instability and the difficulty of converting academic movement into biographical rootedness. It is therefore used to contextualise displacement rather than to compare national academic systems directly.

Fragmented biographies may thus delay life-course milestones such as stable relationships and geographical rootedness, thereby complicating the transition to adulthood. In this sense, the accounts can be read in light of Honwana's notion of waithood, insofar as mobility and work demands keep relationships, residence and future plans provisional (Honwana, 2012).

4.3 Risk for precarious researchers

For the precarious researchers in my sample, risk is linked above all to economic insecurity. Within academia, career continuity is often described as

depending on access to public or private funding (Bozzon et al., 2017), experienced not only as a technical condition of research, but as the material basis of professional survival.

Research is always in an initial precarious stage tied to funds [...] if you bring in funds, the university rewards you, drops mega positions on you from the sky and your precariousness ends. ERC, Marie Curie, competitive calls, Seal of Excellence and so on bring little peace of mind, at least at work (Vincenzo, SS, IT).

Once these twelve years are over, in theory I could work forever, but it all rests on funding. If there are no grants and I can't get financing, I am out. [...] I still don't have the managerial, writing and thinking skills to say: now I write a grant, it gets accepted, I have the money for the next five years. So I basically rely on my boss (Ilaria, HS, DE).

Ilaria's words suggest that risk is also tied to the relationship with the supervisor. Already described as infantilising, this relationship here acquires an economic dimension. The supervisor appears as a gatekeeper (Gaballo, 2016) of the future career, through control over funding and the mediation of academic opportunities and social capital. Under precarious conditions, this asymmetry may intensify both economic and relational subordination.

You are hugely precarious, and if the person you work with is not satisfied, not even necessarily about productivity [...] goodbye and good luck. You must tread lightly, tiptoeing like a dancer in human relations (Alessandro, HS, IT).

There is a dependency relationship... my supervisor found the money and hired me with the money she had for her project [...] that link is very clear (Daniela, SS, DE).

My hands are tied because [...] I am subject to what my supervisor wants. He is the one who holds the reins of my future (Giulia, HS, DE).

Precarious researchers may therefore experience a double dependence, on the performance standards required to secure funding and on senior academics who mediate access to resources and opportunities. Although institutional forms differ, the material points to a recurrent pattern: risk becomes biographically consequential when economic resources, professional recognition and future opportunities depend on conditions researchers cannot fully control. It may therefore deepen a condition that can be read in light of

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Honwana's notion of waithood (2012), insofar as it undermines financial independence as well as residential and personal autonomy, dimensions central to subjective and social understandings of adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Benson & Furstenberg, 2006; Cepa & Furstenberg, 2021). In this respect, waiting is not the absence of adult aspiration or responsibility, but the uncertainty of the institutional means needed to sustain adult commitments.

Risk may also acquire an existential dimension when researchers experience it as limiting their ability to plan their future (see Arienzo, 2017).

It always feels close; I can never throw the stone far and say: maybe I'll get a mortgage and buy a house in my town. Even a small one... it can't be done (Elena, SS, IT).

Today precarity weighs a bit more [...] especially since I'm getting married in June. It weighs because you can't plan your life (Vincenzo, SS, IT).

The loss of predictability shifts attention from the future to the present, while the failure to attain classic markers of adulthood may be socially read as a prolongation of youth or as a postponement of entry into adulthood (see Blatterer, 2007). The accounts, however, point more specifically to a condition in which adult commitments such as housing, marriage and financial autonomy remain conditional on short-term contracts, funding and supervisory decisions.

Contextual differences also emerge in a small number of narratives, although they are not developed as a basis for systematic comparison. Daniela contrasts her position in Germany with the conditions she associates with Italy:

Germany is different. Even though mine is a relatively short five-year contract, compared with what happens in Italy, both inside and outside the university, it is an absolute privilege. I am fortunate to have a more regular salary and to be able to plan some aspects of my life that I could not plan before (Daniela, SS, DE).

This account does not establish a country-level pattern. It nevertheless illustrates how institutionally situated employment arrangements can shape the degree to which precarious work constrains economic security and future planning.

Some interviewees nevertheless partly normalise risk as the price of competing in the academic field and pursuing stabilisation. This can be read through Bourdieu's notion of *illusio* (1992), as a practical and affective investment in the stakes of the field. Precarious conditions become tolerable when endurance, adaptation and self-discipline are imagined as convertible into recognition and stability.

Fixed-term contracts are normal and may last five, six, seven, even ten years [...]. In my field it is the usual start to a career, to gain experience and skills. So I wouldn't call that stage of life precarious (Ettore, HS, DE)

Ettore's account should be read as a contrastive case. It does not represent a separate category of more advanced precarious researchers, but suggests that contractual temporariness may be interpreted differently when filtered through a longer trajectory within the academic field. His narrative partly normalises fixed-term contracts as an ordinary cost of academic work, contrasting with accounts in which precarity is described mainly as delay, dependency or biographical suspension.

Many people talk about research as if it were mining, and they are right, because that is how they see it. But if you approach it maturely, meet your deadlines and do good work properly, it is possible to make it in this world (Elena, SS, IT).

*To stay in the university, you must be built for it, you need the *physique du rôle*. There are not only the smart ones; there are also those who have the *physique* to stay. Like any job, it has its dynamics, its rules. If you don't like them [...] it isn't the place for you (Vincenzo, SS, IT).*

The very rules and expectations that reproduce precarity may thus be internalised as necessary conditions for overcoming it. The paradox is that researchers remain attached to a field whose promises help render its costs bearable. As the image of Sisyphus suggests, what is exhausting and difficult to justify may still be endured because disengagement would mean relinquishing the horizon of fulfilment and stabilisation.

This form of insecurity isn't... justifiable... Yet we move on. Really like... Sisyphus' fatigue (Nino, HS, IT).

Conclusion

This article asked how Italian researchers working in Italy and Germany describe the effects of precarious academic work on the material and symbolic consolidation of adult status. In their accounts, academic precarity is experienced not only as an employment condition, but also as a biographical one, shaping professional recognition, economic autonomy, residential rootedness, intimate relationships and future planning. The interviewees'

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narratives suggest that precarity may undermine adulthood not simply by postponing isolated life-course events, but by making it difficult to stabilise the connections among work, economic autonomy, intimate life, residence and future planning.

The three analytical dimensions clarify how this process takes place. Weak identities concern the gap between demanding professional activity and recognition as an autonomous worker. Fragmented biographies concern the difficulty of maintaining continuity across work, relationships and place. Risk concerns the uncertainty of the resources and opportunities on which future commitments depend. In dialogue with life-course research that treats adulthood as both a sequence of transitions and a matter of subjective and social recognition (Arnett, 2000; Benson & Furstenberg, 2006; Cepa & Furstenberg, 2021; Spéder et al., 2014), the findings suggest that precarious academic work can unsettle the temporal, material and symbolic bases through which adult life is consolidated.

Honwana's notion of *waithood* (2012) helps specify this condition. It is not used to assimilate the interviewees to prolonged youth, but to illuminate the disjunction between participation in highly qualified work and the structural conditions needed to convert that work into durable adult status. In the case analysed here, *waithood* names neither immaturity nor inactivity. It names a situation in which researchers may work, move, form relationships and assume responsibilities, while stable recognition, autonomy, rootedness and a reliable future horizon remain uncertain.

This interpretation requires caution regarding the age and career profile of the interviewees. Since participants occupy different moments of precarious academic trajectories, the analysis does not assume that delay has the same meaning across cases. Rather, it suggests that contractual temporariness may affect different dimensions of adult status depending on the position occupied within the academic trajectory, producing postponed access to autonomy in some cases and the accumulated costs of prolonged academic investment in others.

National context also mattered in some accounts. Daniela, for example, described her German position as comparatively more favourable in terms of salary continuity and the scope for planning than the conditions she associated with Italy. This isolated contrast does not support country-level claims, but it indicates that institutionally situated employment arrangements can shape the intensity with which precarity affects biographical consolidation.

The article therefore advances the understanding of transitions to adulthood within the neoliberal university by showing how highly qualified temporary work may unsettle the material and symbolic bases of adult status even when workers remain continuously active. It does not offer a systematic

comparison between two national academic systems. Rather, it identifies recurrent mechanisms through which precarious work may make adult life difficult to consolidate across institutionally situated trajectories. The findings should therefore be read as analytically transferable rather than statistically generalisable. Weak identities, fragmented biographies and risk do not describe three types of precarious researchers, but three dimensions of the same process.

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