



# Social Exclusion of Youth in Europe

THE MULTIFACETED  
CONSEQUENCES OF LABOUR  
MARKET INSECURITY

EDITED BY MARGE UNT,  
MICHAEL GEBEL, SONIA BERTOLINI,  
VASSILIKI DELIYANNI-KOUMITZI,  
AND DIRK HOFÄCKER

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## The Multifaceted Consequences of Labour Market Insecurity

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First published in Great Britain in 2021 by

Policy Press, an imprint of  
Bristol University Press  
University of Bristol  
1-9 Old Park Hill  
Bristol  
BS2 8BB  
UK  
t: +44 (0)117 954 5940  
e: bup-info@bristol.ac.uk

Details of international sales and distribution partners are available at  
policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4473-5872-5 hardcover

ISBN 978-1-4473-5874-9 OA ePub

ISBN 978-1-4473-5875-6 OA PDF

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Cover design: Clifford Hayes

Front cover image: © Rea Antoniou

Bristol University Press and Policy Press use environmentally responsible print partners.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,

Croydon, CR0 4YY



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# List of abbreviations

AG	generosity of ALMP
AI	investment orientation of ALMP
ALMP	active labour market policy or programme
AP	active labour market policy
CEE	Central and Eastern European
COR	conservation of resources
EPL	employment protection legislation
ESS	European Social Survey
EU	European Union
EUIF	Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund
EU-SILC	European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions
EVS	European Values Study
FA	extended family model
GDP	gross domestic product
HP	Hodrick-Prescott
ILO	International Labour Organization or Office
LLSI	limiting long-standing illness
LM	labour market
LMP	labour market policy or programme
LS	life satisfaction
NEET	not in education, employment or training
PC	PLMP coverage
PG	PLMP generosity
PLMP	passive labour market policy or programme
PPP	purchasing power parity
PPS	power purchasing standards
PRI	proportional reduction in inconsistency
QCA	qualitative comparative analysis
UE	aggregate unemployment
UIF	Unemployment Insurance Fund
UR	unemployment rate
YGS	Youth Guarantee Scheme

## Country codes

AT	Austria
BE	Belgium
BG	Bulgaria



CZ	Czech Republic
DE	Germany
DK	Denmark
EE	Estonia
EL	Greece
ES	Spain
FI	Finland
FR	France
HU	Hungary
IE	Ireland
IT	Italy
LT	Lithuania
LV	Latvia
NL	Netherlands
PL	Poland
PT	Portugal
RO	Romania
SK	Slovakia
UK	United Kingdom

### **Level of education**

LE	low level of education, ISCED scale levels 0–2
ME	medium level of education, ISCED scale levels 3–4
HE	high level of education, ISCED scale levels 5–8

### **Employment status**

NCJ	non-contractual job
NEET	not in education, employment or training
PE	permanent employment
TE	temporary employment
U	unemployment

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# Experiencing unemployment and job insecurity in two European countries: German and Italian young people's well-being and coping strategies

*Christoph Schlee, Rosy Musumeci, and Chiara Ghislieri*

## Introduction

Although young people throughout Europe are increasingly experiencing labour market uncertainties (Müller and Gangl, 2003) and unemployment, there are marked differences between countries (Eurofound, 2012; Eurostat, 2018a, 2018b). Italy, with one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the EU (34.7 per cent in 2017), and Germany with the lowest (6.8 per cent) (Eurostat, 2018a, 2018b), present a strong contrast regarding the labour market situation of young people. Previous studies focusing on the multidimensional concept of job insecurity (Van Vuuren, 1990; Näswall and De Witte, 2003) have shown that in young people in particular, unemployment can have a negative impact on individual subjective well-being and mental health (Paul and Moser, 2009).

In general, there is a growing diffusion of 'insecure' jobs among youth in Europe (Baranowska and Gebel, 2010). In national and local labour markets that are especially poor in opportunities for young people, this phenomenon has an important negative impact on subjective well-being (Kieselbach, 2000; De Witte et al, 2016; Giunchi et al, 2016). Subjective well-being covers both cognitive (life satisfaction) and affective (personal feelings) elements (Diener et al, 1999).

Although many studies confirm the relationship between job insecurity or unemployment and well-being, the dynamics underlying it are not fully understood. Only a few studies have tackled this topic from a qualitative standpoint by highlighting the dynamics and the subjective processes operating in this relationship (for example,



Blustein et al, 2013) and comparing samples from countries in terms of the labour market and the welfare system. To date, there is also a lack of literature exploring the coping strategies – that is, cognitive and behavioural attempts to counter external and internal stress in a problem-oriented or emotional way (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) – that young people put in place to reduce the negative effects of job insecurity or unemployment on well-being (Richter et al, 2013). The aim of this chapter is to improve understanding of how young people perceive their insecure work situations and how they deal with any negative impact on well-being on the individual level.

Based on a qualitative approach, this study investigates individual perceptions of well-being and the associated coping strategies of young people in Italy and Germany. It focuses on similarities and differences between these contexts in order to enrich knowledge of the relationship between unemployment and well-being in these two countries.

In sum, it addresses the following research questions: how do young people in Italy and Germany perceive their subjective well-being while experiencing objective job insecurity and unemployment? How do they deal with their situation in terms of well-being? Are there similarities or differences in coping strategies between young people from Italy and Germany and how can they be explained?

## **Well-being and labour market insecurity**

Well-being – more specifically, subjective well-being – is a multidimensional concept that includes a physical component (health) and a psychological component. The psychological component, in turn, can be differentiated in terms of life satisfaction (cognitive) (Diener et al, 1999), and prevalent affective experience (emotional), (Warr, 1990). Psychological well-being can be general, domain-related, or related to spillover effects between life domains (Grebner et al, 2005).

This chapter considers unemployment and job insecurity together. Job insecurity is defined as a multidimensional concept (Van Vuuren, 1990) with objective and subjective dimensions (Näswall and De Witte, 2003). Job insecurity means uncertainty about the future (De Witte, 2005) and about the continuation of the job as such (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 1984). Unemployment (among youth) means not being employed, but this chapter also considers persons who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) in this context. For more detailed definitions of the concepts, see [Chapter 1](#) of this book.

Notwithstanding many quantitative results confirming the link between objective and subjective job insecurity and well-being,

the mechanisms underlying this relationship are not completely understood. Employment has a manifest and latent function (Jahoda, 1981; Van Hove and Lootens, 2013): the manifest function is related to financial benefits; the latent function, to the fact that a job provides structure in personal life. A job also provides the possibility of taking an active role in life and reaching personal and collective goals. Considering Jahoda's latent deprivation model, job insecurity and unemployment may lead to a decrease of well-being via the fear of not having sufficient income to live adequately in the present (and to project the future), but also through the loss of opportunity to be effective in a collective situation and to structure time in one's life (Paul and Moser, 2009).

In addition, social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) may help in understanding the process: identity issues are particularly relevant in the current fragmented and discontinuous world (Albert et al, 2000; Piccoli et al, 2017).

The link between job insecurity or unemployment and well-being may also be understood using transactional stress theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). In this frame, job insecurity is considered as a stressor (Wang et al, 2015): individuals who are threatened with a possible stressor undertake a primary appraisal to assess whether it is a risk to personal well-being, and a secondary appraisal to evaluate resources and strategies to cope with it. When a job is perceived as being at risk, it is most likely interpreted as a threat, because employment is important for the individual's personal, social, and economic life.

To face a stressor, people activate different strategies. Following Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) definition, coping strategies are cognitive and behavioural efforts that people use to face external and/or internal stressing demands, and they can be distinguished as being either problem-focused (aimed at addressing the problem directly) or emotion-focused (aimed at dealing with feelings associated with the stressor). In some cases, people use avoidance strategies such as denial and escape from the situation (Carver et al, 1989).

Job insecurity also makes it hard to activate helpful coping strategies because the source of job insecurity is undefined: in fact, job insecurity is classified as a rather uncontrollable threat and is linked to a feeling of powerlessness (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 1984).

Moreover, coping strategies to address the symptoms of precarious working condition (for example, health problems) can be located not only on the micro or individual level, but also on the macro and meso social levels. There are, for example, macrocontextual strategies related to actively seeking support from public institutions and the state, and

mesolevel coping strategies that are related to actively seeking support from family and social networks (Fullin, 2004).

Following the literature on stress and coping, the effectiveness of problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping depends on whether or not the source of perceived stress is clear (Folkman et al, 1979; Pinquart and Silbereisen, 2008): problem-focused coping is more effective with an identified source of stress, whereas emotion-focused coping seems to be a better choice if the source of stress is unclear (Armstrong-Stassen, 2005). However, research results on coping as a moderator in the relationship between job insecurity and well-being are contradictory (Richter, 2011). There is no consensus about which coping strategies may be more effective in dealing with job insecurity and in reducing negative consequences for well-being. This may also depend on the fact that studies have mainly considered general coping strategies and not specific ones.

Few studies describe and analyse the specific coping strategies used to face job insecurity (for example, Bagnara and Bargigli, 2009; Heuven et al, 2009; Blustein et al, 2013) and to buffer negative consequences on well-being. Heuven et al (2009) highlighted that some interviewees actively looked for another job as a coping strategy in response to job insecurity, whereas other respondents were more stressed and unable to start an active job search due to psychological problems. Blustein et al (2013) found that behaviours oriented towards improving employability limit the negative consequences of unemployment (for example, training and education, networking) on well-being.

## **Institutional context**

Italy and Germany show extreme contrasts in terms of youth unemployment (those aged 15 to 24). Italy had a youth unemployment rate of 34.7 per cent in 2017, whereas Germany had a rate of 6.8 per cent. Within the European Union (EU-28), the average was 16.8 per cent (Eurostat, 2018a, 2018b). Italy and Germany have been differently affected by the economic crisis of 2008. Starting from two radically different educational systems (Reyneri, 2017), poor career prospects remain present even for university graduates in Italy (Rokicka et al, 2015), whereas in Germany, young people often see their insecure situation as being only temporary (for example, Schlee, 2018). Institutions and traditions seem to be very important when it comes to explaining the big inequalities within Europe (Dietrich and Möller, 2016). Labour market policies seem to be crucial for the individual experience of unemployment (Voßemer et al, 2017). For example, the generosity of

unemployment benefits has a positive effect on the perceived well-being of those affected (Boarini et al, 2013). Germany, as a conservative welfare state, and Italy, as a Southern European state, differ in political measures and programmes in various fields. Compared to Italy, Germany has stronger state support through, for example, unemployment benefits and targeted policies for young people, whereas Italy has few active labour market policies (ALMPs) and no income support for young people without labour market experience (Bertolini and Torroni, 2018). In Italy, family support seems to be more important for young people during periods of job insecurity and unemployment (see Chapter 10 in this volume). Due to these differences, the present study investigates young people's subjective well-being during unemployment or job insecurity, and how they deal with potential occurring limitations and insecurities in the two country contexts.

## Data and methodology

The analysis is based on the full set of interviews from Germany and Italy that were conducted within the EXCEPT project (see Bertolini et al, 2018a). An overview of the general methodology can be found in Chapter 1 in this volume. Several socio-demographic criteria were considered in the sampling process. The sample consists of 90 young people (40 German and 50 Italian cases) aged 18–30 years who were mostly unemployed, NEET, and temporary workers, with different levels of education. Furthermore, they show differences in terms of migrant background and involvement in policy measures. The sample was balanced for gender. The Italian interviews were conducted in Turin in the north and Catania in the south, and the German interviews in different federal states: Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, Hamburg, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saxony, and Saxony-Anhalt (Bertolini et al, 2018b; Schlee, 2018).

A qualitative approach was chosen to examine the perceptions, individual situations, and experiences of youth from a subjective point of view. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to discover patterns in subjective meanings. The research questions were explored with reference to several categories including perception of the current situation, well-being, and possible risk factors for well-being, and coping strategies such as how (limited) well-being can be improved. This referred to existing theories and research by investigating well-being in different dimensions (emotion-focused; problem-focused) and including the levels of coping strategies to be found (micro, meso, macro) as sub-categories. In addition, inductive

sub-categories (data driven) were formed to respond flexibly to emerging phenomena in order to allow for an open analysis approach. Overall, the study applied a combination of a semantic approach focusing on explicit meanings of the data, and a latent approach going beyond what had been said (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A further step elaborated the similarities and differences between the two countries in terms of the developed themes.

## Findings

### *Labour market insecurity and well-being: subjective perceptions and risk factors*

This section presents the interconnections between job insecurity or unemployment and well-being by reporting on the individual perceptions of well-being in objectively insecure labour market situations and on existing risk factors for well-being that emerged among the German and Italian interviewees during the analysis.

Joblessness leaves a profound mark on the lives of the interviewees in Italy: in many interviews, the *sense of malaise* reported, often bordering on experiences of *depressive moods*, has to do with being *disheartened*, with living with the deep *disappointment* engendered by the impossibility of finding a job. Unemployment means staying at home, not meeting people, and lack of participation in a community of work. Work is generally considered by some interviewees to be a possible source of well-being, a tool with which to construct identity: “it is the engine of life” (Paolo, M, 23, LE, TE, IT).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, several interviewees stress the importance of having a job that is compatible with the rest of one’s life and that will also make it possible to have adequate space for family and private life.

Across the German interviews, it is also clear that work, especially the income it brings, plays an important role in perceptions of individual well-being. Inter alia, interviewees mentioned basic needs (for example, shelter, food), having a feeling of (financial) security, having something to do, and being autonomous. If one or more of these essentials is missing, well-being is limited depending on individual life situations and attitudes. Then, at least a sense of *unease or malaise* appears, too.

Moreover, *pessimistic thinking* often emerged from the interviews in both countries. In the cases of Tamara and Mara, the main theme is a *sense of hopelessness*: repeated failure in attempts to find a new job lead to negative thoughts about the future including *despair* and *pessimism*: “My worry is that I’ll have no future” (Mara, F, 30, ME,

U, IT); “Sadness. So many times, I want to cry because I do not feel fulfilled and independent” (Tamara, F, 23, ME, NEET, IT). Marc (M, 24, LE, U, DE) also wants to be independent, but due to his unemployment, he is reliant on others’ support, which makes him *feel sad* and creates a *feeling of inferiority*. In addition, *concerns, fear, and desperation* due to deprivation and poor future prospects resulting from current unemployment appear in some German interviews too:

‘I’m worried about a lot of things at the moment [pause] I’m afraid of the future. I’m afraid that I can’t find a job. I’m afraid that I can’t find a flat and pay for it. I’m afraid that I can’t cope with the whole situation. The whole situation is making me crazy.’ (Tom, M, 20, ME, NEET, DE)

In particular, those who experience unemployment for several years often have *strong fears about the future*. They show strong signs of *stress* and *strain*, in many cases due to financial deprivation. Reported poor prospects for labour market integration seem to be particularly evident among young people with a low level of education or without vocational training or an apprenticeship.

Additionally, for some parents, especially single mothers, strong negative impacts on their own well-being appear as *worries and fears about their own children and their ability to care for them*. Lena (F, 21, ME, U, DE) describes the uncertain financial situation caused by her own unemployment and additionally perceives hurdles to finding a job as a single mother.

Elsewhere in the Italian cases, it is isolation, the lack of activities to signal the passing hours of the day, that emerges from Tommaso’s narrative. He describes the shift from thinking that he has a great deal of free time to experiencing this ‘free’ time as *empty* and *frustrating*:

‘I have lots of free time, too much free time, that’s what I would change [pause] the first few months you say “Yes, that’s fine, that’s great” [pause] After two weeks of getting up at 11, you feel that you no longer want that [pause] The days are all the same.’ (M, 22, ME, U, IT)

A change in the perception of the situation also became apparent for Tina (F, 18, LE, TE, DE) and Maria (F, 27, HE, TE, DE). Some young people who had left or finished school or apprenticeships, or graduated from university, initially accepted unemployment as a normal

part of transition into the labour market and they even enjoyed the free time it offered. However, as time went on, feelings of *discomfort*, *malaise*, and *strain* intensified and became *feelings of uncertainty*, *fear of the future*, and *despair*.

In the German interviews, these feelings seem to be strongly related to a perception of *stigmatisation* (Goffman, 1986) as a result of being unemployed and/or receiving unemployment benefits (especially over an extended period). Despite the positive effect of financial support, an emerging *feeling of financial security*, some of the young interviewees felt a *psychological burden* due to stigmatisation:

‘When you get to know someone for the first time ... you first have to say, “Yes, I’m unemployed” [grows quiet] so it’s always been “But why? Are you lazy?” or stigmatised, something like that. You always get put into a category like that.’ (Katrin, F, 27, LE, U, DE)

Sometimes these negative feelings appear together with a *lack of sense of belonging* to society and a *lack of identity* as well as a stressful feeling of *being dependent on institutions and society*: “Well, I do feel a little like an antisocial loser” (Laura, F, 25, LE, U, DE). In contrast, the Italian interviewees show no such perceptions.

Some Germans such as Klaus (M, 29, ME, U, DE) and Anna (F, 21, LE, U, DE) are *ashamed* that they are not financially independent because they receive unemployment benefits or informal financial support from their friends and family. Hence, they are not in compliance with the norm, whereas in Italy, more young people are unemployed and the unemployed are not generally viewed as outsiders.

In some German interviews, *experiencing poor treatment* (for example, condescending behaviour, lack of support in job search) from employees of the federal employment agency seems to be a factor in poor well-being during unemployment. In addition, some report being sanctioned financially (reduced unemployment benefits) by the agency. This causes a feeling of *incomprehension*, *unfair treatment*, and *being left alone*. This often results in *despair* and even greater *financial insecurity*.

To an even greater extent than German participants, many Italians also reveal a feeling that they do not receive enough institutional support to face up to the labour market and its challenges. This is linked to a feeling of *dissatisfaction* and the perception that living in a country such as Italy, especially southern Italy, is in itself a risk factor. The dominant metaphor is that of a challenge, a fight, a clash. Simply

put, young people feel that they have to *fend for themselves*, find and create opportunities for themselves:

‘In Italy, I think growing up is almost a test of courage! [laughs] because you feel right up against adversity: difficulty in finding work, people impeding you in finding work in every way because ... they are afraid that you will also steal their job because maybe they have the same difficulties as you. That is, becoming an adult in Italy is ugly!’ (Aurelio, M, 22, ME, TE, IT)

Furthermore, in a few German cases, precarious employment, poor working conditions, and part-time or short-term contracts emerged as negative influences on individual well-being. This occurs especially when young people work for temporary employment agencies, and therefore *feel uncertain* due to the impossibility of planning their future. However, in some German and Italian cases such as Franco (M, 30, HE, NCJ, IT), even when a job contract is not secure, work is a source of well-being in itself: this is the case when the work performed is considered meaningful, corresponds to individual interests, and permits self-expression. In the German interviews, this is especially true when the work gives interviewees a degree of financial independence.

Besides the negative effects caused by unemployment or job insecurity, other risk factors for subjective well-being emerged. Although they are not the focus of this chapter, they play an important role in how young people perceive their situation. Physical and psychological limitations such as health problems, being the victim of an accident, poor working conditions, or family conflict are examples of other influences that came to light during the analysis and are important when interpreting individual cases.

This brief description of some young people’s perceptions of labour market uncertainty in Italy and Germany and how they relate to their own well-being showed similarities as well as differences. Some other German respondents did not perceive their situation as uncertain (see also Beelmann et al, 2001; Rogge, 2013), largely because of their own coping strategies and protective factors in their lives.

### *Coping strategies for well-being*

This section reports on the main coping strategies adopted by Italian and German interviewees to manage or improve the situations and difficulties arising with regard to their well-being. Here, coping strategies means strategies the interviewees use or activate to *face the*



*symptoms of their precarious working conditions or to change their employment prospects and conditions.* Where appropriate, this section also reports on the repercussions of adopting certain strategies on the well-being of individual interviewees. Coping strategies are differentiated in terms of the level – micro, meso or macro – on which they operate and the chapter is structured in these terms. The perceived insecurities emerge diversely and with varying intensity. Accordingly, the coping strategies also vary.

### ***Microlevel coping strategies***

Microlevel coping strategies for well-being are the behaviours, cognitive mechanisms, and emotional strategies used by the individual. This section starts by highlighting strategies to *deal with job insecurity and unemployment that have consequences for individual well-being.* In Germany, *seeking jobs or vocational training* on the internet or in newspapers is a common strategy. In addition, job applications are used in different ways to escape immediately insecure life situations or to avoid the risk of a negative impact of unemployment (for example, through financial deprivation, stigmatisation). There are successes in some cases such as Finn (M, 18, LE, U, DE) who got an opportunity to do an internship and acquire work experience (and some money). However, when young people experience prolonged failure with this strategy, it can have a considerable impact on their well-being and can exacerbate the negative effect of unemployment or job insecurity leading to desperation and hopelessness. In the Italian cases, *job search through submitting CVs* is an ‘active’ coping strategy, but it can also generate malaise or frustration and result in the avoidance of job search.

In the German cases, it is apparent that some young people try to *enhance their employability or gain labour market experience* by improving their own education by, inter alia, returning to school (and graduating) and/or the use of internships, in some cases as part of labour market programmes (ALMPs). They are aware of the importance of having a school certificate as a positive signal to employers: “That always looks good, if you have grades or certificates” (Sven, M, 25, LE, U, DE).

In addition, some, like Sven again, *lower or change their aspirations*, as a result of their experiences. They agree to work part-time and/or for temporary employment agencies, sometimes under worse working conditions (low payment, small dismissal protection, and limited chance of being further employed or permanently employed) in order to avoid strong financial deprivations or to try and gain a foothold in the

labour market. This strategy seems similar to the concept of adaptive preferences (Elster, 1983).

Other interviewees from Italy, especially from the south, seek to ‘*escape*’ the *psychic malaise* associated with the impossibility of finding fulfilment in work in one’s own country by planning to *emigrate*. On the one hand, this is described as necessary for realisation as a person and to live happily; on the other hand, it is not devoid of emotional costs: “I would not like to leave Sicily because it is my home, my place but what can I do? [Bitterly] It’s spirit of survival!” (Gaia, F, 24, ME, U, IT). In the German interviews, in contrast, emigration does not seem to be an issue. Most interviewees are aware of the generally good employment opportunities in Germany and opportunities for integration into the labour market (compared to other countries). Only a few such as Klaus (M, 29, ME, U, DE) consider moving abroad, but they are still sceptical as to whether this will actually improve their situation. Moreover, they could currently claim unemployment benefits to ensure a minimum level of security, if necessary.

The interviews offer further examples of microlevel coping strategies used by young people to *reduce or minimise existing negative experiences or to improve individual well-being*. Some interviewees use *leisure time activities* available to them as a way of coping emotionally with the working situation; this can simply mean going to the restaurant as in Erika’s case (F, 29, LE, U, IT).

Another strategy observed in the German interviews is to avoid stress and find some harmony by *lowering one’s expectations and needs* as well as *living economically*, which is often necessary due to reduced financial resources during periods of unemployment. This often goes hand in hand with *accepting the current situation*, in particular for the long-term unemployed with lower secondary education (that is, without vocational training): “Meanwhile I just accepted it ... I actually see more chances for success at my age, if I just take these jobs as an unskilled worker and try to gain a foothold from there” (Marc, M, 24, LE, U, DE).

In other Italian cases, the effort to find personal gratification that the work setting is unable to provide is not made ‘within’ one’s own job and current employment situation but ‘outside’ the workplace. This means trying to reduce the stress associated with precarious employment situations or joblessness by *commitment to their own interests and hobbies*; a coping strategy that allows them to maintain, as far as possible, a certain detachment from the source of their own malaise. Concita (F, 23, ME, U, IT) says that she pushes herself to experience the artistic dimension of life including photography; Pedro (M, 21, ME, PE, IT),

for his part, music; Andrea (M, 24, ME, TE, IT) engages in sport; Margherita (F, 24, ME, U, IT) dedicates time to her favourite hobby of dancing. Some German interviewees also use and focus on other areas such as hobbies as a distraction from the negative consequences of job insecurity on well-being. However, some mention financial limitations and how these get in the way of exercising their hobbies, and this, in turn, can negatively affect their well-being. Klaus (M, 29, ME, U, DE), for example, leaves his apartment only for important appointments, because he no longer has enough money to go partying or meeting friends.

In many cases in both countries, a subsequent *falling back on the present* or a *suppressing* of their own current insecure situations and possible consequences that may arise in the future emerge: “I just push away what might be in a few months” (Katrin, F, 27, LE, U, DE). For the majority of Italians in the sample, negative influences seem to be offset by the *preservation of a gaze towards future horizons* in which one ‘dreams’ of achieving a (stable) relationship in a couple, the formation of a family of one’s own, having children, and a house. Thinking, in short, that sooner or later, one will manage to reach that horizon, nursing that hope, is a coping strategy against the associated anxiety and disquiet – at times declared explicitly, at other times, only hinted at.

Comparable to repression, a few people use *criminal activities* or *drug use* in an attempt to escape their insecure situation with its accompanying stress and anxiety. Klaus, for example, dealt and consumed drugs not only to overcome financial deprivation but also to cope with anxiety: “Back then I was dealing drugs and I was also consuming drugs to escape this nightmare and that is how I basically paid my bills” (Klaus, M, 29, ME, U, DE). Later he regretted these actions. In the Italian cases, drug use does not occur as a response to concerns or fears, but in some cases, the use of tranquillisers and medicines is mentioned.

Another strategy is *to think positively into the future* and *to believe in oneself*, especially in one’s own skills and opportunities in terms of labour market success based on one’s own qualification. This is strongly associated with *optimism*. It is particularly true for German interviewees with a university degree and good prospects for the future. They see their insecure situation as being only temporary. In addition, interviewees who have completed their training or improved their health situation as well as those who are doing internships or have been invited to job interviews such as Simon (M, 25, LE, U, DE) are optimistic, and this prevents severe discomfort. As far as protective factors are concerned, on a microlevel, the Italian interviewees also

cite personal aspects, subjective attitudes such as *optimism*, and *positive thinking*. Optimism and well-being seem to be linked in a virtuous circle: the interviewees presenting situations of greater well-being are also those who describe themselves as being more positive and optimistic about the future: “I’m an optimist ... I’ll be able to deal with job insecurity” (Carlo, M, 26, LE, TE, IT). Alongside *optimism*, *being proactive* and *self-determination* are considered to be personal resources that sustain well-being because, underlying these, there is a desire to build a satisfactory life situation.

To protect himself from the negative effects on his well-being of a precarious employment situation, Franco (M, 30, HE, TE, IT) endeavours to give value to and to appreciate the expressive and relational aspects of his job; he claims to find satisfaction in jobs that are in line with his own interests and downplays the instrumental aspects (contractual stability and income) by activating, it would seem, a strategy of *cognitive dissonance or of ‘compensation’*, or even of *‘adaptation’*. Franco describes himself, moreover, as being quite ‘relaxed’ because he enjoys some self-esteem and considers himself confident about his future employment situation.

In other cases still, it is the thought of *sharing a common employment situation and common risks (even for health) with the young generation* to which one belongs that serves as a microlevel coping strategy to control the malaise emotionally and mentally and avoid the risks of developing serious forms of malaise due to insecurity and lack of work. This makes them feel less bad about their situation. Ester (F, 26, ME, NCJ, IT) thinks that she shares this discomfort with many of her peers and feels that she does not want to end up like many young people who develop full-blown psychological conditions. Therefore, she tries to shake herself up so as not to fall victim to panic attacks and medication. Some of the German interviewees also *gloss over* or try to *normalise* their situation. This is often combined with *optimism*, especially by those who have a good education (for instance, vocational training) and therefore generally good future prospects on the labour market. Fabian, who is on the verge of another period of unemployment, defines his insecure situation as a normal and temporary part in anyone’s life and therefore looks into the future relaxed:

‘So I see it really laid-back since nowadays it’s simply a fact that sometimes people are unemployed. I’m not embarrassed about ... I’ll find something again during the winter.’ (Fabian, M, 22, ME, TE, DE)

However, as already mentioned, being unemployed and receiving unemployment benefits can create a feeling of stigmatisation. Some additionally experience stress and burden because they are unable to care for themselves and therefore have to accept help from other people or the state. In order to ward off negative influences, several, such as Katrin (F, 27, LE, U, DE), say to themselves that the situation has come about through no fault of their own; or they convince themselves that they are not dependent on other individuals, but rather on the state. In this context, some additionally highlight that it is simply their right as citizens to receive this form of support (for example Maja, F, 24, ME, U, DE).

### ***Mesolevel coping strategies***

When focusing on the mesolevel, we can highlight that the majority of German interviewees use their individual *social network* – that is, family, partner, friends, and other important people in young people’s lives, in other words, their social capital (Bourdieu, 1983) – to enhance individual well-being or to avoid or mitigate the negative impact on it. This *informal support* appears in the form of *advice* and *assistance during job searches or the application process* as well as in *establishing contact with employers*. Its success depends largely on a variety of factors, including the ‘quality’ of the individual’s social network and related resources. Nevertheless, it became clear that youth who have the possibility of receiving informal support often show a better sense of well-being than those without. This seems to be a protective factor and can lead to some relief (of stress).

The family’s (and other people’s) support appears useful, on the one hand, to cope with labour market insecurities. On the other hand, in the form of *emotional support*, against negative consequences for well-being caused by unemployment or improve the perception of the current life situation by helping to feel (re)integrated into the social environment and not feel left alone or excluded: “Well, they (parents) were really motivational because they kept saying that everything is just normal” (Julia, F, 27, HE, U, DE).

Strongly related to this emotional support, other young people meet friends or pursue their hobbies in order to have a positive feeling and *escape* from the sense of burden: “Whenever I am outside and meet my friends, then mainly just to escape everything for about an hour or two. To think about something else” (Marc, M, 24, LE, U, DE).

In addition, *material support* via their own social network was also evident, especially from the family of origin, partners, and close friends.

This support, such as giving not only shelter, being able to live together, and financial help but also emotional support, proved to be extremely important for improving or maintaining one's own well-being during labour market insecurities. Thea reports about the importance of sharing the rental costs: "I'd be helpless without my friend ... If I had to pay the apartment on my own, then [pause] I wouldn't have a chance at all with my salary" (Thea, F, 21, LE, TE, DE).

In Italy, the family of origin – and, in certain cases, also uncles and aunts, grandparents, or peers such as cousins – appears to be the most significant source of *emotional* and *psychological support* for the interviewees. Mara, for example, is looking for a job and is depressed. Her family's emotional support is so important to her that it stops her from even considering the idea of emigrating to find work: "I have no desire to go abroad, because my family is here" (F, 29, ME, U, IT).

Likewise, Renata (F, 22, ME, U, IT), who describes herself as an energetic and optimistic woman, turns to her family of origin for considerable support (economic and emotional). There is where she finds the motivation and encouragement to carry on without becoming depressed by the difficulties encountered in the labour market. Thanks to strong and significant protection, she is still well integrated within the environment in which she lives. Many interviewees state that they have recourse to, and greatly appreciate, the emotional support of their families of origin. However, some consider this to be basically insufficient to contain the malaise associated with their employment situation, albeit they acknowledge that this support impacts positively on their well-being and mental stability. Camilla (F, 23, ME, NCJ, IT) lives with her family and is satisfied, but she strongly desires to leave her parents' house and move in with her current boyfriend. However, her working conditions do not allow this.

In some cases, despite appreciation of the family support, this is considered to be definitively ineffective when it comes to coping with the real cause of their own malaise: the absence of a job. For example, Franco says:

'My mum [pause] I mean, she tries to help me, to support me [pause] but for the way I am, these are words that don't work with me. You feel like a loser, useless [pause] It's bad ... the thing that would make the situation less complicated, it's a job.' (Franco, M, 29, HE, NCJ, IT)

In certain cases, it is friends (or boyfriends/girlfriends) above all who are a source of emotional and psychological support. Carlo (M, 25,

LE, TE, IT), highlights the fundamentally positive role of the relational dimension: it is the social dimension and solidarity in participation and volunteering that seem important. It is the human relationships with friends and co-workers that seem to give meaning to his existence.

Among those interviewees who do not seem to experience their situations of job insecurity with anxiety and malaise, Franco, for example, states that this is because he receives considerable financial and emotional support from his family as well as from his informal social network of friends: “I feel lucky because I have an enormous group of friends, I have my family, I have so many things” (Franco, M, 30, HE, TE, IT).

Other interviewees utilise different *channels and relations* to cope with the malaise and the sense of dissatisfaction with their own employment circumstances. Tamara (F, 23, ME, U, IT) attends church together with her family and is able to derive some comfort and peace of mind from it. In other cases, work, even if informal, provides an opportunity for personal expression, and despite the frustration experienced, represents an instrument of well-being.

In both countries, it can be seen that social relationships, especially the family, play an important and often crucial role in directly addressing job insecurity and unemployment as well as in increasing well-being through emotional or financial support. In the Italian cases, support from the nuclear family seems to be used to a greater extent than in the German cases, where due to the greater availability of formal support the family often serves simply as a source of emotional support (for example, providing advice) and help in financial emergencies.

### ***Macrolevel coping strategies***

Macrocontextual strategies refers to actively *seeking support* from public institutions and the state to improve or manage impaired well-being associated with young people’s labour market situation. In the German cases (for example, Sven, M, 25, LE, U, DE), *attending programmes and measures* (ALMP) can be a useful way to *improve skills* (catch up on school certificates) and to *gain work experience* in order to finally improve employability and prospects for the future. Sometimes it is possible to get a foot in the door of some firms for apprenticeships or gain employment through internships; or it offers a means of establishing structure in daily life through clear tasks. Simon, who improved his situation, now has better job prospects and improved well-being: “Well yes, it just brought me ahead. Definitely. It brought a

little [pause] yes [pause] structure to my life. Encouraged me” (Simon, M, 25, LE, U, DE).

However, young people perceive policy programmes and measures very differently. Certain measures are obligatory in Germany if young people want to claim financial support. This can cause stress and appear as an additional burden. Moreover, some are not satisfied with labour market integration measures because these were often not tailored to individual needs and therefore are considered unsuccessful and useless: “I think participating in courses about ‘how to clean my workplace’ or ‘how to use the ten-finger writing system’ is stupid. I think these courses are useless” (Tom, M, 22, ME, NEET, DE). However, regarding the Italian cases, for example, Gaia turned to the Garanzia Giovani [youth guarantee scheme] and views the experience positively. She states:

‘I was depressed. ... it saved me because I found myself with a job, a role, employment. It was positive. It’s been the only positive thing that has happened to me [laughs].’ (Gaia, F, 24, ME, U, IT)

Whereas many interviewees in the Italian sample appreciate the opportunities afforded by macrolevel strategies in helping them cope with their own malaise and focus on improving their employment situations and employability through policy and institutional channels, many interviewees declare that they do not trust politicians and institutions to improve their situation. Several of these young people state that they are not completely convinced that the institutions are interested in doing anything practical to help young people.

Another important protective factor that appears repeatedly in the German interviews is the use of *passive income support policies*, especially unemployment benefits (*Arbeitslosengeld*, unemployment insurance; *Arbeitslosengeld II*, means-tested welfare payments). With this support, difficult financial bottlenecks caused by unemployment can often be absorbed and well-being can be strengthened, or, in some cases, negative influences can be averted: “Without it [Arbeitslosengeld II], I’d probably live under a bridge. I am really thankful for that ... I wouldn’t know what to do with two children and no job” (Simon, M, 25, LE, U, DE). Others like Jana (F, 28, ME, PE, DE) do not worry about future unemployment because they would be entitled to receive unemployment benefits. However, perceptions of the sufficiency of the amount vary across the interviews, and this, in turn, can have a negative effect on well-being if there is a feeling of financial deprivation. In Italy, the insurance income protection system does not provide



unemployment benefit for first job seekers, so the majority of young people in the sample affected by labour market uncertainties were not entitled to any formal support.

However, as already mentioned, dependency on and interaction with the federal employment agency in Germany can have a negative impact on well-being. The agency's actions (such as financial sanctions) are sometimes perceived as obstacles or the reason for the deterioration of their own situations. In general, a lack of entitlement to formal support may also occur, mostly for young people under 25 years of age and still living in their parents' household.

Another strategy related to well-being is the support received from *social workers or the social work institutions* as well as other (*health*) *institutions* that provide emotional support and useful advice. Kerstin (F, 23, LE, U, DE), who has been suffering from mental health issues such as anxiety states and depression, uses professional help in the form of therapies.

The interviews showed that some young people try to overcome labour market uncertainties directly or reduce the negative impact on well-being; their strategies have led to success and they have been able to achieve better future prospects as well as establish structure and meaning in their daily lives. However, despite similarities in the strategies adopted by young people, there are large differences between Germany and Italy, in particular the stronger formal support structures and measures available in the former.

## Conclusions

The aim of this study was to examine young people's perceptions of unemployment and job insecurity in Italy and Germany as well as the coping strategies they use to maintain well-being. Due to a lack of research on this topic, the aim was to better understand how the potentially negative effects on individual well-being indicated in previous research (Kieselbach, 2000; Voßemer and Eunicke, 2015; De Witte et al, 2016) are managed within the framework of the two different country contexts. The study applied a qualitative approach to 90 semi-structured interviews with young people experiencing unemployment or job insecurity in Germany and Italy conducted as part of the EXCEPT project (Bertolini et al, 2018a).

In summary, results on the individual perceptions of the situation of young people are consistent with previous research indicating a general tendency towards negative effects on individual well-being (for example dissatisfaction, malaise, worries, and anxiety). In this respect,

the meanings of work and the functions it entails (Jahoda, 1981) play an important role. However, the cognitive and affective aspects of these negative effects vary between cases, not only within but also between the two countries (Warr, 1990; Diener et al, 1999).

As other research in Germany has also indicated (Grimmer, 2016), young unemployed adults can perceive their situation negatively due to stigmatisation. Norms can be one possible explanation for this, because only a small percentage of youth are unemployed, thereby suggesting that if you cannot find a job, it is your fault. In Italy with its high unemployment figures, in contrast, the situation is seen more as a 'generational fact' because it applies to so many young people. The young share a common condition and this 'mitigates' the negative consequences on well-being, at least in terms of any stigmatisation. Nevertheless, uncertainties are often present that are sometimes more obvious than in the German cases where the state provides stronger formal (financial) protection (unemployment benefits) which can reduce the negative impact on well-being in some cases.

Overall, however, the impact on subjective well-being in both countries seems to depend strongly on individual coping strategies. In both country samples, the microlevel reveals that many young people use the same or similar strategies (see also Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) in their respective contexts, such as optimistic thinking and ignoring or whitewashing the current insecure situation in order to avoid a (potentially) negative influence on their own well-being (emotion-focused); or searching for jobs and writing applications to counter uncertainties such as financial limitations or a lack of meaning, self-identification, and tasks (problem-focused). However, the context appears to play a decisive role. Compared to many Italians, German participants seem to have better prospects for their future, although they are in the same insecure labour market situation, because of the opportunities available to them through school-leaving qualifications or (vocational) training (still to be acquired or already existing). The German dual vocational education and training system, plays a decisive role in this respect (see also Blossfeld and Stockmann, 1998/1999): in contrast to Italy, many young people in Germany with fixed-term contracts are doing an apprenticeship or are at the point of transition into the labour market. There is a strong probability that, over time, this will become permanent employment. In many Italian cases, in contrast, this seems to be more of a general problem of the labour market situation. As a result, they often compare themselves with like-minded people to feel better about their situation (emotional coping).

On the mesolevel, it was obvious that the family and other social relations are very important. As a recurring pattern in many German cases, they use this resource as a protective factor or a help (financially, when no formal support is available or it is insufficient), sometimes for advice, and for emotional support. In Italy, on the other hand, the nuclear family seems to be a permanent and strongly present support in many areas and on different levels (see also [Chapter 10 in this volume](#)). One explanation for these differences is cultural: there is stronger attachment to the family in Italy, and stronger state support in Germany.

When focusing on coping with macrolevel strategies, there were several German cases in which formal support in the form of unemployment benefits or ALMPs can provide some form of security or lead to the development of better prospects for the future. On the one hand, this improves well-being or prevents stronger negative feelings that would otherwise arise from existing financial disadvantages. On the other hand, additional negative effects on young people's well-being emerge due to stigma associated with unemployment or dependency on state benefits. This also becomes clear when the support and counselling services offered by the employment agencies are perceived as insufficient (see also Shore and Tosun, 2017). In many Italian cases, there seems to be a general distrust of the state, with the state seeming to contribute to improvements in only a few cases. Overall sources of coping can also have a negative impact on well-being and sometimes exacerbate the situation, with family conflicts tending to be portrayed in Italy, and perceived problematic interactions (for example sanctions, condescending treatment, lack of support) from the Federal Employment Agency in Germany.

Across the interviews, the majority of German cases reveal that informal and formal support are used in combination, whereas in Italy, there seems to be a much stronger reference to family support. All in all, it proved to be important to focus strongly on individuals and see how intensively they apply which strategies and which combinations of strategies. It was often difficult to distinguish between tackling poor well-being and the job insecurity/unemployment which often led to it. Generally, various strategies emerged in a latent or undifferentiated way during the analysis. Behaviours and actions can be used for specific or multiple purposes, and that makes it difficult to examine and distinguish them. Here, a qualitative approach proved advantageous, because it addressed the subjective perspective and

individual strategies that could be elaborated from an analysis of narratives and the respective context – that is, the personal background and life situation of participants.

However, despite all its advantages, it is naturally also important to consider the limitations of a qualitative research design. These particularly involve the generalisability of results. Nonetheless, the study could make valid statements about the situation of young people and provide important insights into their subjective experiences of their insecure situation, what influence this has on their well-being, and the coping strategies they apply in Italy and Germany. These reveal the particularly strong role of the institutional setting, the labour market situation, and social policies.

### Note

- <sup>1</sup> The information in brackets represent pseudonym, sex, age, level of education, employment status, and country of the interviewee. For explanation of the abbreviations, see Chapter 1.

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