



# 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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# 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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# Unemployment and job precariousness: material and social consequences for Greek and Italian youth

*Lia Figgou, Martina Sourvinou, Christina Athanasiades, Valentina Moiso, and Rosy Musumeci*

## Introduction

There is a growing body of literature on the consequences of unemployment and job precariousness in both Europe (Karanikolos et al, 2013; Berneo, 2014; O'Reilly et al, 2015) and beyond (Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario [PEPSO], 2013; Posel et al, 2014). This research interest seems to derive from the fact that the economic crisis was followed by an increased unemployment rate in many national contexts (Eurostat, 2015). Furthermore, the last decade has been characterised by an immense increase in precarious employment in the labour market that is affecting sectors and groups that had seemed to be insulated from this in the past (Hatton 2011; Standing, 2011).

However, even within this body of research, studies on the socio-economic consequences of labour market insecurity and exclusion for young people are rather infrequent compared to the large amount of research on poverty and deprivation in other age groups. This scarcity is striking, given that young people have been disproportionately affected by increases in the unemployment rate. Furthermore, they constitute a group with certain characteristics, and their risk position – in terms of the socio-economic implications of job insecurity – may differ substantially from that of the general population (Hofäcker et al, 2017). This chapter aims to address this research lacuna by focusing on data derived from interviews with young people in two national contexts: Greece and Italy.



## Theoretical considerations

Existing research on the socio-economic consequences of labour market exclusion and insecurity has revealed the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon (Boon and Farnsworth, 2011; Dowler and O'Connor, 2012). Measures of income poverty and/or material deprivation have been used to investigate the socio-economic disadvantage of either individuals or entire households. Research has been based on either *objective* poverty and deprivation indicators or the *subjective* perceptions of social actors on their socio-economic situation (Hofäcker et al, 2017). Moreover, authors have highlighted the interrelation/intersection between the material and the social and psychosocial implications by elaborating on the ways in which poverty gets under the skin and into the minds of those affected through processes of 'embodied deprivation' (Hodgetts et al, 2007: 714).

Since 2009, the European Union's set of commonly used social indicators has included measures of material deprivation (Deutsch et al, 2015). This term refers to a state of serious economic strain defined as the enforced inability to attain the material standards that most people consider to be desirable or even necessary to lead an adequate life (Whelan et al, 2008; Guio et al, 2016).<sup>1</sup> According to Eurostat data, one out of six members of the European Union population was materially deprived in 2015. The highest proportions were in Bulgaria (49.1 per cent) and Greece (40.8 per cent), with more than half of the materially deprived persons in these countries facing severe deprivation. Similarly, more than half of those considered to be materially deprived in Italy experienced severe material deprivation (although overall, the country was ranked in the middle of the range for European countries). Greece was also among the countries with the largest increase in the proportion of materially deprived people during and following the economic crisis and particularly between the years 2014 and 2015.<sup>2</sup>

The attempt to construct absolute criteria for assessing deprivation is essential to obtaining reliable comparative data from different contexts. It has, however, certain limitations. It is well known that deprivation may be relative, and the feeling of being deprived may be the result of comparisons between oneself and others. Relative deprivation is, in short, the perceived discrepancy between personal status and the status of some relevant other(s). It is the belief that a person is deprived (or entitled to something) based on a comparison to someone else (Davies, 1969). According to relative deprivation theory (Crosby, 1984), the greater the discrepancy between the outcomes people achieve and the outcomes to which they feel entitled, the greater are their feelings

of relative deprivation – and this, in turn, implies greater damage to their well-being (Fryer, 1998). Entitlement to certain outcomes may be constructed through recourse to social (group level) identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). A common finding in the research is that people experience the feeling of being disadvantaged in relation to a reference group. According to Brand and Simon Thomas (2014), economic decline as a result of unemployment may cause a strong feeling of deprivation among more advantaged families whose peers are similarly advantaged and for whom job displacement and subsequent economic decline are a significant shock. Likewise, contexts of widespread unemployment, although associated with severe economic loss, may decrease the probability of internalising blame and the social stigma associated with job loss.

Furthermore, (relative) deprivation may also be the result of comparisons between one's economic status at present and one's past situation. Hence, experiences and feelings of deprivation may be relative, arising from temporal comparisons (Clark et al, 2001; Brand, 2015). In other words, the sharp increase of deprivation in some national contexts (for example, Greece) during the recent economic upheaval may reflect not only the equally sharp decrease of income as a result of massive unemployment and austerity measures, but also the huge difference between one's situation at present in comparison with the past.

The impact of unemployment and job insecurity is not limited to economic decline; it also extends to family and social life and includes considerable short-term and long-term non-economic consequences not only for individuals and households but also for entire communities. Households and individuals who have to deal with enduring unemployment or uncertainty face challenges in starting or maintaining a family, in forming or maintaining friendships, in getting involved in community life, in enjoying recreational activities during their leisure time, or in maintaining a healthy way of life (Brand, 2015; Lewchuk et al, 2015). Moreover, they face psychological and physical distress, and, more often than not, they also have to cope with societal pressures and stigmatisation.

Studies exploring the impact of unemployment on family life have documented an increased risk of family tension and family disruption (Jahoda et al, 1971; Davis and Von Wachter, 2011). Another strand of research on the harmful effects of parental unemployment and job uncertainty on children has indicated a higher likelihood of school dropout and suspension (Johnson et al, 2012), low educational achievement (Kalil and Wightman, 2011), as well as erratic and low income of the children in adulthood (Page et al, 2007).

The relationship between enduring unemployment, resignation, and lack of participation in social and community life has been emphasised repeatedly. It was exposed dramatically in the seminal Marienthal study (a deep ethnographic analysis of everyday life in a community outside of Vienna ridden by the worldwide economic crisis of the 1930s) undertaken by Jahoda and her colleagues almost a century ago (Jahoda et al, 1971). By analysing everyday discourses and practices, these authors delivered an influential work that has contributed to the understanding of subjectivity in unemployment and emphasised that prolonged deprivation, far from causing a rebellious reaction, may lead to despair and resignation (Fine, 2016).

But what was a surprise for political activists and social scientists in 1933 seems to constitute common knowledge nowadays. Research has indicated repeatedly that displaced workers are significantly less likely to participate socially in both formal and informal contexts including community groups, youth organisations, charities, and social gatherings with friends (Brand and Burgard, 2008; Rüdiger and Karyotis, 2013). As Putnam (2000) put it, the strain of uncertainty, psychological distress, (unwanted) geographic mobility, but also reduced social trust and the loss of commitment to social reciprocity, vitally contribute to decreased levels of social participation.

Although research on the socio-economic consequences of unemployment is proliferating, much of it remains restricted to using a top-down approach. With some exceptions (Hodgetts et al, 2007; PEPSO, 2013), most studies on the economic and social consequences of job displacement and precarity apply quantitative methods and predefined categories and concepts. In contrast, this chapter will mobilise the tools and concepts of qualitative research in an attempt to explore the ways in which young (Greek and Italian) interviewees themselves construct their experience of labour market exclusion and/or uncertainty, and to identify the material and social consequences this has for their daily lives and future planning.

## **Institutional context**

The two contexts focused on in this analysis, Greece and Italy, have many similarities. They are both considered to share values and norms that characterise the so-called ‘Southern European social model’ (Karamessini, 2015) and they have been affected strongly by the recent economic crisis. However, they also differ in terms of the structure and growth of their economies as well as in terms of the specific repercussions of the economic recession (Eichorst and Neder, 2014).

Youth unemployment rates, as well as precarious forms of employment, have increased dramatically in both countries in the ‘era of crisis’. Unemployment in Greece in July 2017 amounted to 21.0 per cent, with youth (18–25) unemployment being almost double (42.8 per cent) that of the general population, thereby constituting the highest youth unemployment rate in the EU (Tsekeris et al, 2015). In the same period, the youth employment rate in Italy (reaching 35 per cent) was higher than that across all age groups (11.2 per cent) and that of youth in other European countries (OECD, 2018). A notable characteristic of unemployment in Italy is regional differences, with the higher rates of youth unemployment affecting the southern regions of the country (Leonardi and Pica, 2015). In general, young people have to face difficulties that were not common in past generations, and their situation deserves to be explored in depth (Bello and Cuzzocrea, 2018). Nevertheless, it is not only widespread unemployment that afflicts Greek and Italian youth, but also the spread of insecure forms of employment. In Greece, temporary employment has exceeded permanent forms of employment, with atypical employment increasing as a result of market deregulation and policies to promote flexibility (Gialis and Tsampra, 2015). Joblessness, skill mismatch, and unemployment among highly educated young people have resulted in a massive emigration of highly qualified youth, a phenomenon that is well known as the ‘brain drain’ (Labrianidis, 2014). In Italy, fixed-term contracts grew disproportionately among young adults (Eurostat, 2020). The economic crisis, however, is not the only cause: several labour market reforms have been introduced since the end of the 1990s with the aim of increasing flexibility without linking these new types of contract to adequate forms of social protection and institutional support. The spread of temporary employment increasingly made the search for ‘well-protected’ and stable jobs more difficult, resulting in fragmented and discontinuous work paths for most young people (Bertolini, 2011).

Both countries also suffer from a constant decrease in GDP. However, in Greece, the rapid fall in GDP between 2008 and 2014 (25.9 per cent) as a result of the financial problems and the strict austerity measures that followed the ‘bailout’ deals with the ‘troika’ of the European Commission, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund has produced a humanitarian crisis. According to other commentators, the impoverishment of 35 per cent of the population within a period of four years can be equated with the repercussions of the great depression of the 1930s (Karamessini, 2015). Italy, on the other hand, is witnessing a phenomenon of hidden poverty. Italian GDP is diminishing under austerity measures (Engler and Klein, 2017),

and in the absence of a minimum income scheme, young Italians often need to rely on their families – something that causes increased financial difficulties for the family and enforces their dependency on parents (Saraceno, 2015).

Finally, both Greek and Italian welfare are characterised by fragmentation in entitlements, gaps in social protection, and familialism. Conditions in Greece deteriorated because the rapid increase in unemployment and the fall in economic activity seriously undermined the social insurance system and, in particular, health care coverage. Statistics from the Hellenic Labour Inspectorate reveal that almost 40 per cent of people working in precarious and/or low quality jobs do not have social or health insurance. Within this context, the family is expected to serve as a social shock absorber (Karamessini, 2015) and protect its members from exposure to severe social and financial risks (Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, 2013). Italy is also considered to have a ‘familistic’ welfare system. Family is expected to be (and in fact is) the main protective factor against social and financial risks, although differences can be spotted between the south and the north (León and Migliavacca, 2013).

## Research questions and aims

Focusing upon the two national contexts briefly sketched earlier, the present study aims to explore how the experience of unemployment, job insecurity, and their implications are constructed in the discourse of young people. The approach is based on the assumption that lay people do not necessarily structure and give meaning to their experiences by using the same categories that social scientists apply in their macrosocial approach to social reality. Thus, by adopting a bottom-up approach, the purpose of this chapter is (a) to document the ways in which the material and social consequences of labour market exclusion are constructed by social actors themselves; (b) to highlight the complicated nature of the everyday experience of unemployment and precarity, and (c) to indicate relations and intersections between concepts while reconsidering existing categories and binaries.

## Data and methodology

### *Sample*

The analytic material is derived from 90 semi-structured interviews conducted for the EXCEPT project (see [Chapter 1](#) in this volume). The Greek sample consisted of 40 interviews with 20 men and 20 women

of whom 19 were aged 18 to 24 years and 21 were aged 25 to 30 years. Sampling focused mainly on central and northern Greece, areas both urban and rural in which the unemployment rate is considerably and constantly high. When it comes to the education level, according to the ISCED scale, seven of the interviewees had low education level (ISCED 0-2), 21 had medium level (ISCED 3-4), and 12 had high education level (ISCED 5-8). In terms of employment status, the sample included nine young people in temporary employment (TE), 10 in non-contractual jobs (NCJ), 15 unemployed (U), and six not in education, employment, or training (NEET). It is worth noting that seven of the total sample were immigrants.

The Italian sample consisted of 50 interviews with 31 interviewees living in northern Italy and 19 in the south. The overall sample was balanced in terms of gender. With respect to age, 25 interviewees were aged 18 to 24 years, while the other 25 were aged 25 to 30. Regarding their educational level, most (26 out of 50) had medium education level (ISCED 3-4), 12 had high education level (ISCED 5-8) and 12 had low educational level (ISCED 0-2). Regarding their employment status, 17 had temporary employment (TE), 21 were unemployed (U) or working in non-contractual jobs (NCJ), six were NEET, and another six had permanent employment (PE).

### *Interviews*

Interviewees were recruited through both formal (career counselling services, public employment offices, and training institutions) and informal channels. All interviews took place between November 2015 and July 2016 and lasted from 45 to 120 minutes. In nearly all cases, interviewers first contacted the potential interviewees via telephone and informed them about the research aims in general and the interview procedure in particular. On the day of the interview, the interviewers explained the procedures regarding confidentiality and requested consent to record the interview. Finally, they asked the interviewees to fill out and to sign the consent forms. The interview outline included questions asking directly about interviewees' current economic situation and about savings and financial planning. They were also asked directly about the consequences of unemployment and precarity for their living conditions and future plans and expectations.

### *Analytic procedure*

A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was conducted on the interviews with the assistance of ATLAS.ti 8. The construction of the codebook was both theory driven and inductive. The initial coding phase was data driven, whereas the grouping of codes into themes was both theory driven and guided by the prevalence of these themes across the data set. This phase also used both a semantic approach (focusing mainly on explicit meanings) and a latent approach (taking into account underlying assumptions and implicit relations between data categories).

## **Findings**

### *Material deprivation and economic strain*

At some point in the interview, all interviewees (both Greek and Italian) expressed their concerns about the implications of income shortage and/or instability for their lives. Some of them vividly described the challenges they currently faced, whereas others expressed their fears about the near future and the possibility of having to face unexpected costs. More specifically, all Greek interviewees discussed economic strain as part and parcel of their daily lives and emphasised their inability to face unexpected expenses. Characteristic is the following extract from the interview with Dimos, a young man who works (without a contract) in a small family business. In the interview extract quoted here, Dimos, who lives with his unemployed girlfriend, highlights how difficult it is for them to make ends meet when they rely solely on his own basic income:

‘Uh if something happens out of the blue and you need money, this thing keeps you back [pause] it has happened to me to owe money for electricity for half a year, because something else had come up, my fridge broke down and I had to fix it.’ (Dimos, M, 29, ME, TE, EL)

Most Greek interviewees express their concern that if a serious health problem were to occur, they would not have the means to pay for their treatment. The interviewer invited Valeria, a young woman who at the time of the interview had a temporary non-contractual job at a pharmacy, to evaluate her current employment situation. She reports:

‘Uhm [pause] I don’t believe my money is enough mhm because if a sickness comes up, I cannot afford the cost. Of course, sickness can be the flu [laughs] which is okay. For something, more serious that may involve hospitals and so, money is not enough.’ (Valeria, F, 24, ME, TE, EL)

Greek young people refer to their inability to cover health expenses and their tendency to postpone a visit to a doctor unless they face really serious health problems. The majority of interviewees depict particular medical treatments (such as dental treatment) as totally inaccessible. Young people whose work trajectories have been characterised by precariousness and income instability emphasise their inability to organise their expenses and engage in any type of financial planning. In the following extract, Victoria, who was unemployed at the time of the interview, talks about her past employment experiences when she was working in modelling as a freelancer.

‘The bad thing with it [working as a freelancer] is that you don’t earn a standard amount of money per month, so that you can organise your expenses, and some months may go great while on others you may earn nothing.’ (Victoria, F, 27, HE, U, EL)

According to some Greek interviewees, one reason why their budget management is extremely challenging is having to pay back existing debts. Debts accumulate during periods of unemployment, and the low-paid jobs that follow these periods do not provide the financial resources to manage existing debts without accumulating new ones.

But although the previous findings apply to the vast majority of the Greek sample, there were also some cases in which Greek interviewees narrated stories of extreme poverty and deprivation, talking about their difficulty in covering basic needs such as food or electricity. Asimakis, an interviewee who lives under extreme poverty conditions, vividly describes his situation:

‘I’m deprived of, first of all, of the most basic things. Food. Let’s say a steak, to have a steak in a Sunday meal. We reached the point of seeing it [a meal that includes meat] as a miracle.’ (Asimakis, M, 24, LE, NEET, EL)

According to the interviewee himself, long-term unemployment and absence of family support have contributed to his situation. Extreme



poverty in the parental family and lack of familial support seem to constitute an important risk factor for Foteini. In the following extract, Foteini describes the conditions of extreme poverty that she and her family had to face when her father's small business closed down as a result of the economic crisis. The interviewee, who was unemployed at the time of interview, is particularly eager to find any (type of) job in order to cover her own needs and to support her family financially.

'We have spent many years without electricity [pause] it was really hard and I don't think that any kid should be forced to go through this thing [lower voice], because we owned a gift shop and it didn't do well, and we ended up in a thing where we had no electricity, we had to eat from the soup kitchen.' (Foteini, F, 20, ME, U, EL)

The majority of Italian interviewees, on the other hand, do not narrate stories of extreme deprivation. In general, they mention cutting back on what they deem to be unnecessary expenses such as holidays or leisure activities, but they do not represent themselves as being materially deprived, maintaining that they are in a position to cover their more urgent needs.

'Basically, what do I need, apart from the rent? It's not that I'm a big spender, nothing else than eating a sandwich, when I'm out, or a beer. I also don't travel much. If I do, I'll take a train and I'll stay with friends who can host me.' (Carlo, M, 26, LE, TE, IT)

Of course – in common with the findings from the Greek study – low pay or work and income discontinuity represent important risk factors for economic strain for Italian youth as well. In many cases, their income allows them to cover only their basic daily needs, and the only buffer against deprivation is family support. Hence, in common with the Greek context, family economic background is a very important protective factor against the most severe implications of unemployment and precarity.

Living in the south of Italy where the percentage of population at risk of poverty is almost double the national rate (Istat, 2016) seems to constitute a differentiating factor between Italian respondents. Youth from the south maintained that both they and their families had been affected by the crisis, and they face its implications in their everyday lives. Gaia was unemployed at the time of the interview and she was unable to rely on her family, because her father (an electrician) was also affected by the economic crisis (seven years later). As Gaia says:

‘When he [the father] comes back home, he brings shopping bags full of fruit because old people sometimes pay him this way. Sometimes people also pay him with bad cheques. We have found our bank account empty many times.’ (Gaia, F, 24, ME, U, IT)

Tamara was also unemployed, as were her father and her brother. Her mother is a housewife, but she sometimes works irregularly, taking care of an old woman without a regular labour contract:

‘My mom has now got a job. She takes care of an elderly lady, aged 88. She is saving some money, in order to buy a car. A car would be very useful. We go everywhere on foot, even when we need to go to the doctor!’ (Tamara, F, 23, ME, U, IT)

### *Long-term financial planning and the time perspective*

Unemployment and precarity also impact on young people’s ability to make long-term financial plans. Income poverty and/or instability make it extremely difficult for both the Greek and the Italian respondents to save money and to make long-term financial arrangements and plans – something that has dramatic implications for different phases of the respondents’ lives. As Stavros, a Greek young man who works on a temporary basis as a supply teacher in the public sector puts it, he earns some money every now and then, and when the work comes to an end, he starts to worry until the next temporary appointment comes through:

‘I know that this year, I will work until June, I will earn some money and then again I will start to worry. So, there is no room for long-term plans.’ (Stavros, M, 28, HE, TE, EL)

Lack of long-term planning in general and retirement plans in particular can be found in Greek interviewees’ accounts of the problematic aspects of the Greek social insurance system. The rigours of acquiring social insurance puzzle them. Olek, a second-generation immigrant to Greece from Ukraine, has been working to support himself since completing his compulsory education. He has changed jobs many times, but he has not received any insurance or employment stamps as evidence of his work experience. He describes this situation as being the rule in the Greek market, and that causes worries for the future.

I: Regarding your employment is there anything that concerns you?

R: It does concern me that I will never get pensioned, because I do not have the employment stamps needed and they [pause] they don't give you any out there. (Olek, M, 26, HE, U, EL)

Italian interviewees also maintain that they are unable to do much for their economic future. In fact, they do not earn enough to be able to save or invest. Furthermore, they point out that they do not think about retirement plans. Having a pension seems a rather remote objective that is difficult to achieve. Hence, investing in a pension and paying contributions means simply *losing money*:

'I would work, I would work again, paid under the table. Anyway, I won't get the pension myself. So why should I give them the money? To pay someone else's retirement benefits?' (Mara, F, 30, ME, U, IT)

To sum up, the majority of both Greek and Italian interviewees seem to pay attention to short-term economic consequences and to be oriented towards the present. Their inability to plan for the future results, according to interviewees' accounts, in a focus on the present, on immediate needs and short-term goals, and on lowering one's expectations. This 'present-time' orientation demonstrates not only an inability to have control over the future but also distrust towards it. The following quotes from Mara, a young Italian woman, and Dimos, a Greek interviewee, are examples of the present-focused perspective of youth:

'At this moment I don't see any future [pause] it's bad to say so, but it's like that. The money, really, the money makes the future.' (Mara, F, 30, ME, U, IT)

'As I told you I live thinking only of the present [pause] I always think that yes, in the future nothing is for granted. I may be left without a job, for example.' (Dimos, M, 29, ME, TE, EL)

In many cases, intergenerational comparisons illustrate the lack of future perspectives among young people. In the following extract, Mary, a young Greek woman, compares her life with that of her parents. She claims that they lived a 'full' life while she stands still due to unemployment:

I: Mhm. So, you think your parents have been living better? You think it was better back then?

R: Yes, yes. Much better. They had a job, the opportunity to dream, and the potential to make their dreams come true.  
(Mary, F, 26, ME, U, EL)

In the same way, Italian interviewees feel deprived compared to their parents, but not compared to their peers with whom they share the situation of precariousness.

### *Implications for family life*

The lack of adequate financial resources, and therefore of autonomy, not only raises the risk of severe economic deprivation, but also affects social and family relationships. The majority of Greek and Italian interviewees report on the consequences for family life caused by financial strain. For example, Valeria sees the everyday tensions in her family as natural in the context of financial hardships:

I: Did you have any other sort of income?  
R: No. No, no, uuh I was strained with uuh the reactions in my home, which were natural but they didn't do any good [pause] when there is no income, there is a negative atmosphere, fights, complaints. (Valeria, F, 24, ME, TE, EL)

Italian youth living with parents also reported some cases in which the family climate is affected by economic hardship, with quarrels between family members on how to use the little money they earn being part of their daily routine. Tamara, for example – quoted earlier when commenting on the material consequences for their family of her father's job loss – also maintains that her relationship with him has become really difficult to deal with:

'I can't talk with my father. We don't get on well. With my mother, yes: since we have the same opinion about many things.'  
(Tamara, F, 23, ME, U, IT).

As far as relationships with partners are concerned, research has shown that precarious employment, non-standard working hours, and irregular work schedules may make it difficult to co-ordinate shared leisure time between couples, and that this has implications for the sustainability of relationships (Craig and Brown, 2014). Partnership relations also seem to be affected by the disruption of the male breadwinner/female caregiver model and the increase in women's 'market-related resources'

(Fuwa, 2014). In the following extract, Thomas expresses concerns over the implications of the fact that his partner seems to be the main bearer of the financial burden of the household:

- I: Does your partner have a steady job?  
R: She has a steady job, yes, and unfortunately, she shoulders more expenses than me, which is very stressing.  
I: For you?  
R: Yes. She herself hasn't touched on the issue but you can comprehend that it is an issue. Maybe not for her, but for the people around us. (Thomas, M, 28, HE, NCJ, EL)

Precarious employment can shape and limit important life decisions including partnership formation, where to live, when to start a family, and many other choices that can affect the quality of life of individuals and households. Many of our interviewees maintain that they may decide to live with partners and gain some of the benefits of marriage, including sharing housing costs. However, making strong commitments seems unrealistic, given their uncertain future. Thanos, who was unemployed at the time of interview, states that starting a family is an issue that worries him and his friends:

'We would like a family, but nowadays it's so hard to think about it, even if you have a relationship that's going towards this direction uuh it's hard. I mean, your job is not for sure these days.' (Thanos, M, 27, ME, U, EL)

Along the same lines, Andrea, a young Italian man, says that he is very reluctant to start a family given his poor and unstable income; and he constructs this situation as being common for people of his age.

'I really like to have a family, but how can you support a family on €800 a month from precarious work? I hope we won't go back to the Middle Ages when they would choose for you a partner who had money.' (Andrea, M, 24, ME, TE, IT)

### *Maintaining friendships and social bonds, participating in social life*

Precarity and economic hardship seem to affect the social life of interviewees. As previous research indicates (Lewchuk et al, 2015), income instability lessens the chances of being involved in social

activities and being engaged with the community. Therefore, it increases the chances of social isolation. The workplace can function as a social network in which friendships might occur. Hence, when a person is unemployed or employed under precarious conditions, the likelihood of forming social bonds is limited. In the following extract, Thaleia, a Greek interviewee, considers that forming new friendships constitutes one of the positive aspects of having a job.

‘Maybe those who aren’t in the working field don’t have the chance to meet new people. That’s because, when you work, you meet people, you mingle with them and necessarily you have some common interests. I still have contacts with people from my last job. We go for a coffee, we share our news.’ (Thaleia, F, 24, HE, U, EL)

Interviewees also pointed out that unemployment and precarity can affect existing friendships, because of the financial incapacity to participate in social activities and to follow social norms. They pointed out that material deprivation is often accompanied by feelings of shame. Gedi, a young immigrant living in Greece, vividly describes how poverty penetrates social life:

‘I can’t go out like a normal person to drink a coffee with my friends. I don’t go out. If you don’t work, you can’t do anything, you go out with your friends, they drink a beer, but you don’t have a euro in your pocket, you get mad.’ (Gedi, M, 28, LE, NEET, EL)

Along the same lines, Mara who had no income of her own at the time of the interview, argues that she cannot have any social life. Having a social life, she maintains, always implies costs that she cannot afford:

‘I cannot buy any Christmas presents, because I cannot afford it. I’d like to go to the theatre, but with what money? So, these are all things that, anyway... force you to stay at home, in the end, to become antisocial.’ (Mara, F, 30, ME, U, IT)

The fact that young people are forced to withdraw from friendships and social life due to economic hardship seems to produce a vicious circle, because according to their own accounts, friends constitute a very important source of support. According to our interviewees, even if it

is not a source of information on how to get a job, the social network remains an important source of material and emotional support.

### *Being deprived of basic rights and reluctant to claim them*

Another important outcome of living in conditions of prolonged uncertainty, according to youth interviewees, is the fear of claiming one's rights. As other commentators have argued, unemployment and precarity may result not only in deprivation of economic rights but also of civil, cultural, and political rights *de iure* and *de facto* (Standing, 2014). Job insecurity leads to compromise and accepting less because of the fear of long-term unemployment. Complaints about the way in which the labour market situation can result in deprivation of rights are evident in interviews in both countries, albeit more frequently in the Greek context – something that, given the rate of youth unemployment, is to be expected. Kiriaki, a young Greek woman, maintains:

'I believe that everyone is afraid of demanding their rights, because we know that if we demand anything, we won't continue working or we won't even be hired, so we keep our mouths shut. We don't ask for anything, because the boss will say "If you don't accept what I'm giving you, I can find someone else" [pause] there is so much unemployment.' (Kiriaki, F, 29, HE, NCJ, EL)

Greek interviewees draw comparisons between the pre- and post-crisis labour market. Gedi talks about how he used to bargain for better wages. However, in recent years, he accepts a job under any (in many cases humiliating) circumstances.

'Now you can't [bargain] [pause] heads down. Back then you would say "I want this money". If they didn't give you, you would go elsewhere mhm now they just don't give you. Now they say uuh "Do you want that? If you don't, don't come."' (Gedi, M, 28, LE, NEET, EL)

Nevertheless, interviewees do not construct their reluctance to claim their rights as some type of resignation. Instead they represent it as a decision imposed on them by the fact that precarious work constitutes the only alternative to unemployment. Exploitation and precarious conditions are not constructed as an exception; they are represented as a generalised work regime. Within this regime, youth

do not have a choice. The only alternative to precarious employment is unemployment (Kesisoglou et al, 2016).

Interviewees also emphasise that, in order to make claims, they have to meet certain requirements such as having formal employment status (a contract) or having been employed for a certain period of time. Entitlement to (most) employment rights is a consequence of being fully integrated into the labour market. Thus, under conditions of insecurity, it is very difficult to make claims. Emma, a young Italian woman, says:

‘At the \*\*\* [4-star hotel on the ski slopes] I replaced a member of the staff for two weeks [pause]. No contract. He paid me €50 for two weeks of work [pause], I was finishing work at two o’clock at night, starting again at six, four hours to sleep [pause] but anyway at that moment I had nothing in my hand.’ (Emma, F, 20, ME, TE, IT)

Hence, the result is a vicious circle: precarity makes claiming one’s rights difficult or even impossible, and by the same token, gives birth to further exploitation and uncertainty. In some cases, interviewees maintain that after having worked for a couple of weeks, they were ‘fired’ without notice and told that they would not be paid because they had just completed a trial period. This was the case for Olek, quoted in the following extract:

‘I had spent two, two and a half weeks working there, when I told them to give me my money, they said “Uh no, you were on a trial period.”’ (Olek, M, 26, HE, U, EL)

The interviewees are willing to make a lot of compromises in order to obtain a job: Francesca was advised not to say she had a child when she was called again for a job through a private agency. Her daughter was only 3 months old and Francesca needed to work because she did not receive any type of institutional support:

‘I was only 19, I was told: “No one is ever gonna bother keeping you there, if you have kids.” My daughter was so little – 3 months! She was 3 months old. I could have stayed longer with my daughter! Of course. But obviously since I didn’t have a contract, I didn’t have the opportunity to go on maternity leave or anything.’ (Francesca, F, 23, LE, TE, IT)



For other Greek and Italian youth, working without payment is something that they themselves offer to do in periods of prolonged unemployment in order to improve their job prospects. This is the only way, according to some interviewees, to obtain the work experience that employers commonly ask for:

‘Of course, I was looking for a job. I was looking in newspapers and I was asking people, but it was hard. If you don’t have work experience, they will not hire you [pause] So, after that I started working voluntarily at a cafeteria, without payment. I worked for a whole summer without being paid.’ (Matina, F, 22, ME, TE, EL)

‘Honestly, I can adjust myself to everything. You know even if I don’t get paid, I’ll do it all the same, rather than staying at home, being paid or not!’ (Isa, F, 22, ME, U, IT)

In most cases, the interviewees themselves admit that this strategy seems to have negative implications, not only for the individual lives of the young employees themselves, but also for further deregulation of the labour market. Young people end up with insignificant short-term work experience which does not substantially improve their employment prospects. On the other hand, willingness to work under any conditions harms individual self-esteem and reinforces exploitation.

## Conclusions

This chapter considered the material and social consequences of unemployment and job precariousness as constructed subjectively in interviews with Greek and Italian young people. Findings reveal that the implications are drastic and complex and affect many aspects of respondents’ private and social lives. As far as the Greek interviewees’ construction of their economic and material situation is concerned, the analysis confirmed what has been documented repeatedly in other studies (Karanikolos et al, 2013; Tsekeris et al, 2015): Greek society is experiencing a deep humanitarian crisis with tremendous effects. Thus, the most vulnerable of the interviewees narrated stories of severe deprivation and poverty such as having to live without enough food, heating, and electricity for long periods of time. The majority of Italian young people, on the other hand, did not represent themselves as being severely materially deprived. The relatively infrequent narratives of severe deprivation in the Italian sample come from interviewees located in the south of the country where the effects of the economic crisis

seem to be more salient. Italian youth, however, also face the material implications of unstable income and fragmented and discontinuous working paths that allow them to cover only their essential basic needs (Bertolini, 2011).

In both contexts, family is constructed as a potential source of support, and the material situation of youth is related closely to the financial situation of the parental family. In Italy, parental material support appears to constitute the most important protective factor against the harshest implications of income poverty and/or instability, creating a phenomenon of 'hidden poverty' (Saraceno, 2015). In Greece, on the other hand, where unemployment in the general population has reached dramatic proportions, let alone the high youth unemployment rate, other family members, including parents, are also affected by unemployment and low work intensity, and the family cannot always protect young people from severe social and financial risks (Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, 2013).

Both Greek and Italian interviewees, even if the latter do not construct their financial situation as being extremely harsh, express their complete inability to engage in any type of financial planning, and they construct access to pension and future financial security as an objective that they will never achieve. Consequently, they avoid considering the future and prefer to work 'under the table' – something that affects interviewees' 'employment capital' and has multifaceted negative implications for different aspects of their life (Thomas et al, 2013). Interviewees' tendency to focus on the present and to distrust the future seems to echo the results of other studies on the economic crisis and its repercussions on the general population. According to the Eurobarometer (2014), a high percentage of Greek (almost 65 per cent) and Italian (42 per cent) people argue that as a result of the crisis and its repercussions, they refrain from dreaming about or making plans for the future. Other authors have argued that, as a result of the austerity in Southern Europe, new ways of approaching temporality have emerged (Knight and Stewart, 2016). According to these authors, austerity differs from poverty or underdevelopment, because it applies to situations in which social actors or communities that used to enjoy higher standards of living have to cope with a new situation. In these situations, the linear course of events, which characterises the modern collective representation of reality, gives way to temporal comparisons and 'plunges societies into the converse of counterfactual history in which one is invited to ask, "what if the past had happened differently?"' (Knight and Stewart, 2016: 3). Intergenerational comparisons that contrasted the present situation of

youth with that enjoyed by previous generations were common in our interviewees' accounts. These comparisons involve both temporal and intergroup dimensions, and they make explicit the complexity of the construct of subjective (relative) experience of poverty/deprivation and the difficulty in operationalising it.

Apart from employment capital, the interviewees' social capital is also affected by unemployment and labour market exclusion (Van Oorschot et al, 2006). As other commentators have stressed (Jahoda, 1981), employment is associated not only with visible material benefits but also with latent benefits such as a time structure, social contacts, and personal status. Interviewees maintain that the workplace gives them the chance to meet new people and to form social bonds and friendships. In contrast, during periods of unemployment, they become totally isolated. Furthermore, involvement in social life is conditional upon one's ability to spend; and poverty may in some cases have implications that violate social norms. Personal and family life are presented as influenced in various ways by a precarious work life and by unemployment. First, employment insecurity, unpredictable work schedules, and varying income flows increase tensions at home and make it difficult to sustain relationships. Second, due to insecurity, long-term binding decisions are necessarily postponed (Buchholz et al, 2008). Finally, another consequence situated within the social and political sphere of the interviewees' lives has to do with the violation of certain rights and entitlements. They tend to maintain that they are reluctant to claim their employment rights and tolerate labour exploitation because the only alternative to poor employment conditions and precarity is unemployment (Kesisoglou et al, 2016).

In conclusion, these findings from interviews with young people in two Southern European countries situate the material and social implications of unemployment and precarity in the context of the recent economic turmoil in line with existing literature. The bottom-up perspective adopted here, however, serves to highlight complex relations and intersections between constructs that are usually contrasted and operationalised in existing literature (temporal vs group comparisons, individual vs household deprivation), and this perspective emphasises new forms of subjectivity and agency (Gershon et al, 2011; Standing, 2011). Of course, given the nature of qualitative research, it is necessary to recognise that although these findings may be valid in the specific context in which they are set, their generalisation is limited. However, some of the intersections between constructs that have been indicated here may have some validity beyond the specific microsocial context and confirm the need to give prominence to

lay discourses and subjective experiences at times of ever-growing inequality (Fine, 2016).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This refers particularly to the inability to afford items and activities such as a washing machine, TV, telephone, car, holidays once a year, and keeping one's home adequately warm. It also includes enforced inability to pay unexpected expenses and being confronted with payment arrears (for example, mortgage or rent, utility bills).
- <sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:Material\\_deprivation](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:Material_deprivation)

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