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Liminality, COVID-19 and the long crisis of young adults' employment

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Abstract

The COVID-19 crisis has brought into sharp relief the precarious employment situation of young people, precipitating a raft of academic and public claims of an unprecedented crisis that has disrupted young lives. Our study contributes to research on youth labour and transitions with new longitudinal empirical analysis. Our analysis challenges the “newness” of the precarity highlighted by COVID-19, focussing on employment. It draws on longitudinal mixed methods data from a research project tracking the transition to adulthood of young Australians. We make use of the concept of liminality to analyse the labour patterns for this group of young adults for the past 5 years. While we acknowledge the impact of COVID-19 on young people's lives, our analysis reveals a precarisation of labour conditions for a significant proportion of participants that precedes the pandemic crisis. We conclude that the tendency in some youth research and in public discourse, to depict contemporary events as heralding “new” crises for young people, obscures the deeper structural arrangements that continually position the young to take the brunt of social and economic policies.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, employment, liminality, longitudinal studies, young adulthood

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 crisis has brought conceptualisations and discourses of lives disrupted to the forefront of academic and public discussion. Researchers have focussed especially on disruptions to education and employment practices that jeopardise young people's ability to make a living and progress through the traditional milestones of adulthood on a normative schedule (Lambovska et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2021). Other scholars have emphasised interruptions to mobility due to local (O'Keeffe & Daley, 2022) and international restrictions on human movement and the closure of local and national borders (Cairns et al., 2021), as well as the disruption and reconfiguration of leisure practices (Woodrow & Moore, 2021). These studies share a focus on young people's lives in limbo, suspended in time. With some exceptions (e.g. Lambovska et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2021), they tend to focus on the present, and they generally address the disruption of contemporary experiences by considering how this renders the present unrecognisable from the not-so-distant past.

In this way, analyses of COVID-19 exemplify a tendency to focus on the present, on contemporary events, in research on young adults. This tendency to narrow the historical horizon has previously received ample criticism. For example, Norbert Elias (1987, p. 223) argued that classic sociological work, such as that of Marx and Weber, focussed on examining the most contemporary, pressing social problems of the time by focussing on their "own time as a stage between past and possible futures." He argued that concentrating solely on "one small momentary phase" of human activity could be detrimental to explanations anchored in the past and oriented toward possible futures. Furlong et al. (2018) have drawn on Elias' work to argue for long-term perspectives to challenge contemporary conceptualisations of youth as a precarious generation and a social class of its own (see Standing, 2011). Furlong et al. (2018 p. 11) caution against views that "hermetically seal" the present from the past and disconnect current experiences of work from "change and transformation over the long term."

In this article, we examine whether conditions of labour precarity for young adults in Australia *respond* to the COVID-19 crisis or whether they *precede* it, and we find their genesis in the long-term deterioration of secure employment. In this way, we contribute to the literature on youth employment and transitions with new longitudinal empirical analysis to argue that the precarisation of youth employment can be traced to a few decades ago. Like other scholars (e.g. O'Keeffe et al., 2022), we thus question the "unprecedented" nature of the pandemic crisis in this respect. Thus, to examine the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on young adults' employment patterns, we draw on longitudinal mixed methods data from a research project tracking a cohort of Australian young adults as they transition to adulthood. We use the concept of liminality as a theoretical framework to examine the employment patterns and conditions for young adults before and during the pandemic (between 2017 and 2021). A concept originally developed within social anthropology by van Gennep, liminality refers "to the ubiquitous rites of passage as a category of cultural experience," capturing "in-between" situations and conditions characterised by the dislocation of established structures (Horvarth et al., 2015, p. 2). In this article, we draw on Furlong et al.'s (2018) sociological use of liminality to explore the prevailing ambiguity, uncertainty and in-betweenness that characterises young adults' labour market trajectories.

In the following section, we consider the relevance of the COVID-19 crisis to work patterns. We then discuss the concept of liminality, considering its utility for understanding young adults' lives, and in particular their working conditions. This is followed by an explanation of our research approach and methods, and a quantitative analysis of our cohort of young adults and the impact of COVID-19 on those in precarious work. We then present a longitudinal qualitative analysis of the employment trajectory of some participants in this study. In the final two sections, we discuss and analyse how participants make sense of their employment trajectories, including the impact of COVID-19. We conclude that while the pandemic was experienced as a shock or sudden crisis by many, its impact on the employment of some young adults represented

a continuation of existing patterns of insecure employment and precarity rather than a new crisis. We argue that the tendency in youth research to portray contemporary events as bringing “new” crises for young people obscures the deeper structural arrangements that continually position the young to take the brunt of social and economic policies.

2 | THE CRISIS OF COVID-19

With every economic recession and financial crisis, young people and adults are among the most socioeconomically affected social groups (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011; Bessant et al., 2017). This impact is not just felt during periods of crisis but in the years that follow, as shown by Furlong et al.'s (2018) analysis of the economic recession of the 1980s in the UK and by Denny and Churchill's (2016) analysis of the lasting effects of the global financial crisis of 2008 on Australian youth employment opportunities. The socioeconomic crisis of COVID-19 was no exception, and in its first 6 months, young people and young adults were the most affected in terms of loss of employment and reduced hours of work (Borland & Charlton, 2020). They are more likely than older employees to be employed on a casual contract and are concentrated in industries that were heavily affected by the lockdown measures, such as tourism, hospitality and retail.

Young adults who experience periods of unemployment are prone to further unemployment later in life (Borland & Charlton, 2020); they have lower future medium-term earnings (Andrews et al., 2020) and poorer well-being outcomes (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2020). These scarring effects apply in particular to those entering the labour market at a time of recession or crisis. The problem for young people leaving school in the first decade of the new century is that they have endured the effects of two financial and labour crises (e.g. Global Financial Crisis and COVID-19 Crisis) with their subsequent “scarring effect,” which means that early career problems in the labour market impact on their long-term opportunities (Borland & Coelli, 2021). As mentioned above, it also refers to the fact that problems in one sphere of life, such as labour, impact over time on other realms, such as health, housing or relationships (Cuervo & Chesters, 2019). This means that generational dimensions must be considered alongside social differences within a youth cohort. The socioeconomic impact of the pandemic was not homogeneous. Research shows that women, individuals from a low socioeconomic background and young migrants and refugees were most financially and socially affected by the COVID-19 crisis (Couch et al., 2021; Maestriperi, 2021).

The COVID-19 crisis generated a view of society trapped in a situation of in-betweenness, uncertainty and ambiguity (see Cairns et al., 2021; Couch et al., 2021). This shared experience has drawn a significant amount of scholarly attention to the concept of liminality across a range of disciplines. For instance, liminality has been used to explain what the nursing profession could teach people who are dealing with the unknown and the potential loss of loved ones (Wayland, 2021). Other studies have reflected on how the pandemic produced a reconfiguration of identities through the interruption of social relationality and the everyday performativity of the subject within the liminal time and space of COVID-19 (Cover, 2021). However, there has been a remarkably low uptake of the concept of liminality to analyse the experience of the pandemic within the field of youth studies. Important exceptions are Woodrow and Moore's (2021) study of young people's understandings of “liminal leisure” before and during the pandemic in the UK and Cairns et al.'s (2021) interrogation of new forms of precarity that arose for international students in Portugal during the pandemic, including the need to extend their studies, with its associated costs, which led to the continuation of a liminal life situation.

3 | LIMINALITY AND YOUNG ADULTS' EMPLOYMENT PATTERNS

Traditional social understandings of liminality associate it with van Gennep's (van Gennep, 1960 [1909]) and subsequently Turner's (1967) views of the initiation of youth into adulthood as a

typical rite of passage. These authors contend that the transition into adulthood does not just happen naturally, but rather has a very specific structure with a set of specific experiences (Szakolczai, 2009). Anthropological treatments of liminality have been guided by the study of rites of passage for young people moving into new social roles, and by consideration of the experience of this type of “in-betweenness” (Turner, 1967). This article adds to this scholarship by drawing on a sociological approach derived from Furlong et al.'s (2018) study. Furlong and colleagues explore the changing economic landscapes in the UK in the last few decades to challenge Standing's (2011) idea that the Global Financial Crisis of 2008/2009 unleashed the emergence of the “precarariat” through the prevalence of youth precarious employment. To scrutinise Standing's thesis, they make use of the concept of liminality to explore trends in youth unemployment, underemployment, insecurity and the prevalence of work poverty in young adulthood under harsh economic conditions.

Taking a longitudinal view on youth employment, Furlong and colleagues find the concept of liminality useful to highlight the dissonance between traditional expectations of full-time secure employment opportunities in industrial societies and the increasing normalisation of precarious work for young people. That is, the employment young adults now enter is increasingly “not permanent, does not ‘belong’, and has no definite occupational identity or career” (Furlong et al., 2018, p. 16). Labour has increasingly become the cornerstone of a period of liminality, ambiguity and in-betweenness for young people with the transition and incorporation into the secure full-time labour market taking longer than in the past (Andres & Wyn, 2010; Campbell & Burgess, 2018; Cuervo & Wyn, 2016). The problem with this liminal state is that, as Furlong and colleagues point out, there are no temporal assurances of a stable resolution to this period of ambiguity and transition.

Goodwin (2007) has also taken up this idea of liminality and ambiguity in youth employment to argue that young people are incorporated into the labour market through casual and flexible jobs as part of state- and market-sanctioned forms of peripheral participation. The problematic aspect is that as they move from a periphery to an established zone of labour, this liminal status of being “in a kind of limbo” (Furlong et al., 2018, p. 18) offers fewer working rights and benefits and normalises the notion of having to pay your dues to achieve secure work, even when there is no guarantee of secure work on the horizon. Thus, in this transition, youth and young adults remain “neither here nor there” (Turner, 1967 p. 95), in “a tedious limbo” (Boland & Griffin, 2015 p. 30) as the “most obvious ‘liminal individuals’ in the most liminal work roles” (Furlong et al., 2018, p. 18).

This conceptualisation of contemporary employment for young people as long-term liminality serves to counterbalance views that adjudicate this state of liminality intrinsically to the COVID-19 crisis. The crisis has brought ideas, metaphors and conceptualisations of life being disrupted (Walsh et al., 2021); of youth being demoralised about their future (Fronek & Briggs, 2021); and work being enveloped by uncertainty and ambiguity—including the reconfiguration to working from home (Izak et al., 2022). While there is no dispute that the COVID-19 crisis disrupted daily routines and employment for many young people, as well as introducing new social, economic and health risks, some researchers have already argued that the precarisation of youth employment and the economic disadvantaging of young people can be traced to several decades ago (Bessant et al., 2017; O’Keeffe et al., 2022). O’Keeffe et al. (2022 p. 3) show that youth and young adults have suffered decades of increasing precarisation of work; increasingly unaffordable housing markets; a contracting youth welfare regime—including strict conditionality to access benefits; and rising educational costs under a user-pays higher education system. Bessant et al. (2017) frame young people's precarity with the lens of a political economy of generations. Their analysis of the situation of young people in France, Spain, the UK, the United States and Australia reveals the entrenchment of unemployment and underemployment of young people by neoliberal policies that began in the early 1980s. Longitudinal analyses of youth employment support claims of an increase in less secure conditions at work and rising

underemployment with the subsequent “hollowing out” of the full-time labour market for youth and young adults (Cebulla & Whetton, 2018, p. 305; see also Campbell & Burgess, 2018; Cuervo & Cook, 2020). Additionally, since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, research has shown a slowing down on the annual rate of job growth and a sharp decrease in youth working hours and wage growth (see Borland & Charlton, 2020; Productivity Commission, 2020). These harsh social and economic conditions serve to dynamically maintain and solidify the state of liminality that finds youth and young adults “neither here nor there.” Subsequently, a perennially reinforced state of liminality in the employment sphere, we argue, feeds into other spheres of life (e.g. health and relationships). Ultimately, in this liminal state, precarity becomes an embodied experience of vulnerability and ontological insecurity in which precarious workers lack control over their labour conditions and, in many instances, over different aspects of their everyday life. This is analysed in detail by Farrugia (2021 p. 138) who describes the “enormous demands” contemporary work modes (such as the gig economy) place on young people's subjectivities. However, while the research conducted thus far on the pandemic context has provided a compelling evidence base of the policy and political landscape in which current discourses of young adults and insecure work have developed, it has not addressed these experiences from the perspectives of young adults. In order to address this area of relative silence, we now turn to our study, which brings together qualitative and quantitative measures of insecure employment and traces how they are experienced by young adults over time.

4 | METHODS

In this paper, we offer a mixed method analysis of young adults' experiences of liminality in Australia. The analysis draws on longitudinal survey data collected with a cohort of young Australians as part of the Life Patterns study. The Life Patterns study recruited participants aged 16–17 years in high schools and vocational education and training institutions in 2005–2006 and 2009. The initial survey sample recruited 3977 participants from a stratified sample of schools in four states and territories: Victoria, New South Wales (NSW), the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and Tasmania. The sampling strategy was designed to recruit a sample of students' representative of the broader student body in 2005 in the penultimate school year (i.e. Year 11) with respect to gender and school sector. To do this, a stratified cluster selection process took place, where schools were selected at random within the relevant state and sector cluster. Within selected schools, the whole cohort was invited to participate. This initial sample included 55.1 per cent of young women and 44.9 per cent of young men. It included 57.1 per cent of government school students, 27.3 per cent of Catholic school students and 14.8 per cent of independent school students (0.6 per cent had missing school sector information). Due to the high level of attrition by Wave 3 after students had left school ($n = 1285$ in 2007), the recruitment of a top-up sample of 348 students enrolled in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes in NSW and Victoria was organised in 2009. The choice of TAFE institutions for the top-up sample was made in response to the greater retention of students going to university and of women in the original sample. Surveys have been distributed annually to participants until 2021 (i.e. Wave 17), when participants had reached young adulthood. The surveys for different waves include cross-wave and wave-specific themes and topics relating to young people's personal and social life, education, work, relationships, health, aspirations and life satisfaction. They include both categorical (e.g. Likert-scale and multiple-choice) and open-ended questions.

As is common in sample-based longitudinal surveys of young people, the cohort experienced a high attrition rate in the first years of the study, and women have been more likely to continue participating in the study than men. We use two main strategies given the observed attrition. First, we centre the analysis on open-text comments provided by participants, with descriptive statistical results presented in support of the qualitative analysis rather than as the central component

of the analysis. This approach is commonly described as “qualitative-dominant” mixed analysis (Onwuegbuzie & Combs, 2010). Second, because attrition has been nonrandom with respect to gender and educational trajectories, no claim is made that the analysis presented here is representative of the corresponding age cohort as whole. The analytical strategy for statistical description focusses on comparing subgroups of respondents within the group of participants retained in the study in the most recent survey waves (based on their experiences of insecure employment across several waves), rather than on seeking to generalise the patterns observed in the sample to the broader corresponding age population.

For the present analysis, we selected a subsample of participants who had reported their job tenure status (nonpermanent versus permanent) in at least one of the five most recent survey waves, that is between 2017 (when participants were aged 28–29 years) and 2021 (when participants were aged 32–33 years). We categorise these participants as “young adults” in response to the increasingly extended nature of this life stage (Blatterer, 2007; Wyn et al., 2020). We focus on the five most recent waves to combine the use of longitudinal information with a focus on the age range of late-twenties and beyond the first years of post-secondary school life, when many of our participants are still engaged in further and higher education, living in the family home and combining work with study. Looking across five waves of data enables us to integrate a longitudinal dimension into the analysis of young adults' experiences of COVID-19 and, thus, explore the meaning and significance of liminality for this cohort.

For the statistical description, we use data from the five most recent waves to construct a binary typology of “precarious” and “stable” workers, as opposed to a more fine-grained typology with a higher number of categories or examination of more diverse labour market circumstances. Participants who reported working while having a nonpermanent contract in at least half of the waves for which data were available were classified as precarious, while those who spent more than half of the waves in permanent work were categorised as secure workers. We adopt this approach as a simple way of categorising employment precarity pre-COVID-19 in a manner that facilitates descriptive comparisons of the experiences of the pandemic. We also chose this binary typology to retain a large enough sample given the existence of nonresponses about employment precarity in some waves (381 in-scope respondents provided information in four or five waves, and 155 respondents in three or fewer waves). We acknowledge this approach has limitations, including the facts that permanent contracts are an imperfect indicator of employment stability, and that more sophisticated typologies can be constructed to capture temporal variations in labour market participation. However, we propose that the two-category typology is relevant for the present purpose, that is to contextualise the qualitative analysis. This typology identified 420 secure workers and 143 precarious workers in the Life Patterns study sample, for a total of 563 in-scope respondents.

The purpose of the statistical analysis is to contextualise the qualitative analysis of respondents' open-ended text comments rather than to make claims of generalisability to the broader population of young adults of the corresponding ages in Australia. As a result, we report descriptive statistical results (percentages) and chi-squared tests for independence to ascertain whether the differences between precarious and securely employed respondents are statistically significant. The quantitative analysis is conducted on the responses to the 2021 survey ($N=470$) to compare the attributes of young adults in precarious versus secure employment as regards (1) overall social circumstances, (2) work, and (3) income and economic resources. These results provide insights into contrasting young adult lives during COVID-19. Where required, the type of responses or categories reported is explained in the notes accompanying the relevant tables.

Following our quantitative analysis, we present cases of participants that exemplify the experiences of our cohort of young adults in a state of liminality at work. These data are drawn from the open-text responses to the question “We are interested in understanding how job insecurity affects you – Please comment,” which was asked in five waves of surveys (2017–2021). We also draw data from an open-text question asked of participants in 2021: “How has COVID-

TABLE 1 Overall social circumstances, by precarity status (%).

		Overall sample	Secure	Precarious	Gap
Gender	Woman	67.4	66.6	69.7	3.1
Location	Capital city	60.9	60.7	61.5	0.8
	Regional town	23.7	24.0	22.9	-1.1
	Rural	15.4	15.3	15.6	0.3
Living arrangements	Living on my own	12.6	13.1	11.0	-2.1
	Living with my partner	28.0	28.7	25.7	-3.0
	Living with my partner and child(ren)	36.7	37.8	33.0	-4.8
	Other (living with parents, shared household, single parent or other)	22.8	20.5	30.3	9.8
Residential status	Renting	30.3	24.7	49.0	24.3**
	Owning with mortgage	51.2	55.1	38.0	-17.1**
	Owning outright	18.5	20.2	13.0	-7.2
Relationship	In a relationship living together	25.4	25.6	24.5	-1.1
	Not in a relationship	22.1	20.8	26.4	5.6
	Married	42.1	44.2	35.5	-8.7
	Other (in a relationship not living together, divorced/separated, etc.)	10.4	9.4	13.6	4.2
Qualification (highest)	Postgraduate degree	32.8	30.5	40.0	9.5
	Undergraduate degree	48.9	51.1	41.8	-9.3
	Other tertiary qualification or schooling only	18.3	18.4	18.2	-0.2

Note: * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$.

19 affected your life in terms of work, income, ability to pay your living expenses, etc.?" In total, we analysed 1658 text responses from those participants who have stated at least twice in the last 5 years ($N = 101$) that they were experiencing insecure working conditions. As Table 1 shows, like many longitudinal studies, we have more women continuing to participate than men, as well as an over-representation of university-educated participants and homeowners. Hence, in our qualitative analysis, there is a greater number of comments from women and young adults with a university qualification, as they represent a larger proportion of our sample. Relatedly, the voices of men, young adults without a university qualification and renters are under-represented in this paper's results (see Churchill & Khan, 2021; Furlong et al., 2018; Miranda & Alfredo, 2022; for existing research on work precarity for this more disadvantaged cohort).

It must be noted that the analyses do not claim to represent the entire spectrum of social conditions of existence and labour market circumstances of young adults. As the results will make clear, we do not claim that the respondents we categorise as "precarious" represent the most disadvantaged young people of their generations, nor that our participants are representative of their age cohort as a whole. Many of them have acquired higher education qualifications (around eight in 10 have a university degree), and some have been able to access jobs typically associated with middle-class lives. Yet, the fact that our sample is highly qualified makes the exploration of liminality in young adulthood that is much more compelling. If prolonged experiences of insecure, unstable or challenging work are evident among hitherto less exposed segments of the class structure (compared with working-class or other disadvantaged groups of young adults, for instance), they are likely to be even more characteristic of young adult life among working-class individuals.

4.1 | Findings: The Social, Work and Economic Circumstances of Precarity

Before exploring the work experiences and economic circumstances of young adults in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic using our typology, it is important to consider their respective social circumstances. Table 1 does so, looking at their gender, residential location, living arrangements, residential status, relationship status and qualification levels. Overall, precarious and secure workers are comparable in terms of gender and geographical location across capital cities, regional towns and rural areas. Differences exist in terms of living arrangements, relationships and qualification levels, but these are not statistically significant. Precarious respondents are more likely to live with their parents or in a share house and less likely to live alone or with a partner. Precarious respondents are more likely than secure workers to have a postgraduate degree and less likely to have an undergraduate degree as their highest qualification, but the differences are not statistically significant.

With respect to their overall conditions of existence, only in housing do we observe statistically significant gaps between the two groups. Precarious respondents are 24.3 percentage points less likely to own a property (outright or with a mortgage): 75.3 per cent of workers in secure jobs own a residential property, compared to just 51 per cent of precarious workers. For young adults, the experience of prolonged or recurring unstable employment is thus associated with a decline in access to housing stability and security.

It is in their working lives during COVID-19 that precarious workers had markedly different opportunities and experiences compared with workers in secure employment. In addition to being significantly less likely to report working at the time of the survey (by 8.3 points), those who reported working were less likely to work standard 9AM to 5PM hours (by 9.9 points). Precarious workers were significantly more likely to work non-standard and irregular hours of various kinds, including weekend shifts (+10.6 points), evening or night shifts (+11.3 points), working on public holidays (+12.0 points) and work hours changing from week to week (+17.5 points). In summary, young adults working in nonpermanent jobs tended to be in jobs with less predictable or standard work hours in 2021.

Less predictable and more challenging work hours also appeared to be associated with other work-related difficulties. Expectedly, precarious respondents were significantly less likely to agree that they have good job security (by 30.3 points). But they were also less likely than secure workers to report good chances for promotion (13.5-point gap), good physical conditions (by 7.8 points) and a safe work environment (by 8.2 points) (the last two are not statistically significant). At the same time, they were significantly more likely to consider that their work is physically stressful (by 11.6 points). In these circumstances, the fact that precarious workers were more likely to report looking forward to coming to work (by 11.0 points, nonstatistically significant) may have more to do with the financial implications of the absence of work than with the satisfaction of the work activities and tasks themselves (Table 2).

To examine young adults' access to economic resources as they experienced precarious work situations in the midst of the pandemic, Table 3 reports on participants' source of income and economic support. Precarious workers were significantly less likely to have access to full-time work as a source of income (by 17.5 points), and significantly more likely to rely on part-time work (by 11.1 points) and government and welfare payments (by 12.4 points). Across the three tables, the analysis paints a picture of a group of young adults who were not markedly different than their peers in general social characteristics (except with respect to real estate assets) yet had profoundly different working lives and economic experiences during COVID-19. This is the case even though the majority of these precarious workers had acquired higher education qualifications and could appear protected from the most severe whims of the labour market compared with their less qualified peers.

TABLE 2 Experiences at work and job quality, by precarity status (%).

		Secure	Precarious	Gap
Currently working		90.3	82.0	-8.3*
Work hours	9 AM to 5 PM work	68.5	58.6	-9.9
	Evening/night shifts	19.3	30.6	11.3*
	Weekend shifts	22.7	33.3	10.6*
	Work on public holidays	16.8	28.8	12.0**
	Work hours vary weekly	29.2	46.7	17.5**
Job quality: positive	Environmentally safe workplace	78.9	70.7	-8.2
	Good physical conditions	81.1	73.3	-7.8
	Work directly related to my qualifications	74.2	73.6	-0.6
	Use of my skills and abilities	88.5	86.8	-1.7
	Interesting work	83.1	85.7	2.6
	Looking forward to coming to work	60.4	71.4	11.0
	Sense of accomplishment	76.2	78.0	1.8
	Independence/autonomy	66.9	65.9	-1.0
	Decision making	71.6	66.3	-5.3
	What I expected to do at this stage of my career	62.9	58.2	-4.7
	Good chances for promotion	43.9	30.4	-13.5*
	Good pay	76.3	75.8	-0.5
	Secure job	86.8	56.5	-30.3**
Job quality: negative	Physically stressful	20.6	32.2	11.6*
	Psychologically stressful	60.7	59.3	-1.4
	Work stress will make me physically ill	27.6	25.3	-2.3

Note: results for work hours are the percentage of respondents answering "yes"; results for positive and negative job quality are the percentage of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the proposed statements.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$.

TABLE 3 Sources of income and other economic resources, by precarity status (%).

	Secure	Precarious	Gap
Full-time work	71.6	54.1	-17.5**
Part-time work	27.6	38.7	11.1*
Personal savings	38.4	42.3	3.9
Family support	12.2	14.4	2.2
Private loan	9.7	5.4	-4.3
Government payments	6.5	18.9	12.4**

Note: * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$.

4.2 | The Impact of Covid-19 on Young Adults' Lives

In 2021, we asked our participants in an open-text question in the survey to comment on: "How has COVID-19 affected your life in terms of work, income, ability to pay your living expenses, etc?" Among the 470 respondents, three in 10 (29 per cent) did not leave a response. After coding the responses, the same proportion (30 per cent) stated no impact in terms of their employment and financial well-being, a similarly sized group (31 per cent) affirmed they were negatively

impacted, while one in 10 (10 per cent) stated they were positively impacted by the pandemic—mostly through the possibility of saving a substantial part of their income, but also from the benefit of working from home, including a fairer share of parental and household duties. While in this article we are focussed on employment patterns, if we consider the impact of COVID-19 on the participants' health and relationships (the subject of two other open-ended questions in our survey), the share of respondents reporting a negative impact expectedly increases to over half of our cohort that year.

Coding answers to this open-text question revealed a heterogeneity of experiences. Participants wrote about the experience of working from home, where “overtime is the new normal,” as “the boundary between work and home has eroded” (female participant, living with her partner and children, project manager). Other participants wrote about their experience of having their working hours reduced or losing their jobs and having to rely on family and government assistance: “I was on JobKeeper payments for a few months which covered rent, however I relied heavily on my partner's income for groceries during that time” (Female, living with her partner, dentist). For some participants, COVID-19 lockdowns represented an opportunity to save a significant share of their income: “Saved more money than ever before!,” commented a female participant, working in public service and living with her partner and child. Some felt they were at risk of losing their work: “COVID-19 did not change my conditions, but it put them at risk; I had to work all the time to reduce the risk of job loss” (female, living with her partner, speech pathologist). Finally, some participants welcomed the extra government support during the pandemic, in the form of JobKeeper, thus signalling the significance of state policy in ameliorating individuals' socioeconomic circumstances:

During COVID lockdown we were actually eligible for financial support from the government for the first time ever – my husband earns just over the threshold... just! So we were for once actually in a good position while receiving that support. We could spend more on food and doing things as a family. Now that is over we are back to struggling to pay what we need to each week.

(Female, living with partner and parents, retail worker)

These responses gave us a picture of the upheaval created by the pandemic, but we soon realised that it was problematic to hermetically seal participants' contemporary pandemic experience from their past (Furlong et al., 2018). The impact of and response to the pandemic have an individual and social history that each need to be considered in order to explain the present. In the next section, we present the longitudinal experiences of some of the participants. These cases are drawn from the stories of the 101 participants who wrote about their 2021 experiences and who were in a working condition of nonpermanent employment at least twice in the last five survey waves.

4.3 | A Permanent State of Liminality at Work

In this section, we introduce case studies from participants who illustrate the state of liminality of some young adults' employment and the impact of precarious labour on many spheres of life. In 2021, Veronica, who has a postgraduate degree, was working as a teacher on a limited-term contract. A few years before, in 2017 at the age of 28, she wrote when asked about her working conditions: “I don't earn enough and need a day job working in schools – otherwise secure.” The next year she stated: “I need more hours, otherwise I love what I do.” In 2019, in response to the same question on how her working conditions affected her, she said: “It affects future plans for buying a house and is hard to plan trips as don't know if will have a job.” By the 2019 survey, she answered “yes” to having experienced job insecurity in the last 5 years. She subsequently commented that the impossibility of planning was not her only problem and highlighted

dissatisfaction with her health: “I am not as fit as I would like.” In 2021, after 1 year of the pandemic, she expressed: “As I am in renewable contract, I was off contract for 3 months and had to do casual work.” However, when asked “please comment on how COVID-19 has affected your life,” she replied: “It hasn't.”

Veronica's case illustrates the many facets that compose liminal employment. She has, like many of her peers, experienced a decrease in hours worked (underemployment) and in wages per hour. This experience has been widespread for her generation since the Global Financial Crisis of 2009 (Productivity Commission, 2020). Low wages and underemployment have been found to impact young adults' capacity to plan, for instance in terms of relationships and housing, for the future (Cuervo & Chesters, 2019) and have resulted in poor well-being outcomes (Landstedt et al., 2017; Wyn, 2022). It is interesting, though, that when asked in 2021 if the pandemic affected her life, she replied “it hasn't”—thus, perhaps showing how being in liminal state of employment has been normalised by some young adults. Farrugia's study of young adult workers supports this view, finding that they engage in considerable identity work to define their experiences of precarity through the lens of “self-realization” that enables them to “negotiate precarity” rather than challenge it (2021 p. 138).

Another teacher, Silvia, commented in 2017: “The job insecurity I faced didn't affect me that much as I had Centrelink payments to fall back on.” Two years later, in 2019 and aged 30, Silvia said:

While living with my parents, job security didn't worry me that much, but now that I am living [on] my own, I do worry that I could lose my temporary position and struggle to pay my rent and bills.

One year into the pandemic, in 2021, she commented:

Even with the teacher shortage it is very difficult to get a permanent position. Temporary contracts give you some security, however your contract can end with only 4 weeks' notice if a permanent teacher is transferred in or if the position is advertised.

Reflecting on the impact of COVID-19 on her life, she added:

As a teacher I was ‘essential’, so COVID didn't affect me financially. Teaching during COVID was about 3 times the amount of work and the students are still showing the negative results of ‘learning from home’.

Like Veronica and many peers, Silvia has grown used to the liminal state of work. Unsurprisingly, COVID-19 represents, for her, a continuation of the status quo, but with a temporary sense of security brought about by her categorisation as an “essential worker” (something that was not accompanied by any changes in her contract or conditions). Additionally, like many in her cohort, Silvia has had to rely on welfare assistance, and most importantly, has offset her precarious condition through parental support. This experience reinforces that family and relationship have become contemporary critical actors in mitigating the effects of precarity for young adults (see Antonucci, 2018).

At the age of 28, in 2017, when asked about the impact of job insecurity, Julia stated:

Yes, I am saving a lot of money instead of spending it on courses (e.g. first aid course) because I don't know if I will need the money in coming months. My partner is working more hours to cover our shortfall. I can't plan for a holiday because my work is casual and no work = no pay.

The following year she affirmed:

I have 2 casual positions – one at a university (as a technical officer), and on weekends (nights) I drive trucks. This is to balance out the risk of unemployment, as the

truck driving is needing workers and I have been encouraged and supported when starting a career in an industry I have no experience in.

In 2019, at the age of 30, Julia offered the following reflection:

To me, job insecurity means irregular casual work or approaching the end of a job contract. So then, I'd feel obliged to do all work I could in the meantime, to save money. This would mean sacrificing family/social time and stress and putting future plans on hold until job security is reached.

The next year she mentioned being tired and unable to socialise due to her precarious job. In 2021, she commented: "Being on limited term contracts makes me worried about money and contract renewal, probably from about halfway through onwards. I start looking for new positions with 12 months or less remaining." Asked about COVID-19 impact, she said:

My main job stayed the same. My second job got very busy. I have worked 7 days a week now for nearly 12 months. Money has not been a problem for me fortunately, and I will holiday when things quieten.

Julia's case illustrates the challenges that many young adults face in making ends meet—working two jobs and moving between fixed-term contracts. For her, planning is just about staying afloat in order to avoid falling into long-term unemployment. Thus, the COVID-19 crisis represents a similar challenge to that already encountered in the preceding years of precarious work.

4.4 | The Normalisation of Precarity

The story depicted by our participants' experiences so far reveals that being in a liminal state in relation to the labour market has become so engrained for some young adults that understandings of precarious and secure employment positions have become fuzzy and ambiguous. While COVID-19 offered important challenges, these young adults were not strangers to liminal states of employment. Moreover, their protracted experiences of insecure and precarious work have meant that some of them did not actually consider themselves to be in insecure work because they did not anticipate losing their job in the immediate future. For example, in 2017, Natalie had a fixed-term job and reported:

I am currently secure in my job but it is a term-time only position so there are portions of the year where I am not receiving any payment. I am slightly worried as to how this will affect my future plans.

The following year, she told us:

My working conditions are quite good, though I am employed in a term-time only position. I am valued in my role and receive many opportunities from my supervisor to be involved in higher level tasks and decisions.

One year later, and despite having been employed on fixed-term contracts for the whole period, she responded "No" to our question in the survey: "Have you experienced job insecurity in the period 2015–2019?" Two years later, at the age of 32, and in the thick of the pandemic crisis, Natalie reported that she was made redundant from her job (library technician). She added, "the change was completely unexpected. I managed to obtain employment for 2021 at a lower

level/paid position but it is only on a single-year contract.” The reduced income in her fixed-term role as a library technician had an impact on her future plans:

I have been in the process of saving for a house. My reduced income has also reduced the amount I am able to borrow. Currently my living expenses are still low because I am living with my mother and sister.

Patricia's working and living situation offers a similar case of the normalisation of liminality, where holding two casual jobs is sometimes understood as being in a “permanent” employment position. In 2017, Patricia (aged 28) worked as a designer and commented: “One of my part time jobs can vary in the workload and can become insecure.” Two years later, she stated:

Job insecurity adds stress to everyday living. It makes life stressful in terms of future plans, family & social arrangement. Not knowing how long you will be working in the job and whether you should be looking for work or moving to a different area to find more secure work.

In 2021, at the age of 32, Patricia said that “COVID-19 increased my workload,” which meant that she was not able to take holidays but stabilised her income. She answered that she was in “permanent” employment, but in a later question about working conditions in 2021, she revealed: “being a casual at two jobs meant that I was unsure how long I would be working.”

Anthony has a trade certificate and has been working in the construction industry for a decade. He has told us that he has experienced job insecurity for that period of time. In 2017, at the age of 29, Anthony commented: “working in the construction industry it has very poor job security. I do worry how I will be able to support my family if there is any downturn in work.” The following year he told us he “enjoyed the work I do but the industry seems declining in job stability, pay and conditions.” When he was asked in 2019, at the age of 31, if job insecurity affected him, Anthony responded in capital letters: “MASSIVELY, is how it affects me.” He added:

My current job has 4 weeks left on the current site. We have 8 employees, and our company doesn't have any other work for us after this job. I have been with them 5 years. I'm constantly unable to sleep thinking about it. I have a wife who studies and is pregnant, a child and a mortgage. All reliant on my income.

When the pandemic hit, Anthony found the new uncertainty very common. He told us: “being construction based, job insecurity is a very common thing.” This normalisation of precarity by participants occurred despite it affecting their plans and their well-being. For many of these young adults, there is a normalisation of liminality and precarity due to their ability to sustain a continuous string of limited-term contracts.

5 | CONCLUSION

The experience of insecure employment is relatively widespread among the young adults. Although the participants in the Life Patterns study are relatively privileged when compared to their wider age cohort, with particularly high levels of tertiary education and homeownership, it is notable that a quarter of them was nevertheless still affected by insecure employment in their late 20s and into their 30s. When this is considered in relation to the enduring (although weakened) link between tertiary education and secure employment, it seems likely that this liminal experience of employment is much more widespread among less privileged members of their

age cohort (see Cuervo & Chesters, 2019). Although the pandemic context had a particularly adverse effect on the portion of our sample who were already in insecure employment, we have shown that the disruption and anxiety that it caused was by no means a new experience for these participants. Following Furlong et al. (2018), we have conceptualised this protracted experience of insecure employment as an experience of liminality. We find this concept useful for capturing aspects of both the material and subjective dimensions of their experience. Understanding long-term experiences of insecure work through the concept of liminality allows us to consider how the participants are positioned within the labour market—in a near-permanent state of in-betweenness that belies the false promise of precarity as a temporary, transitional state on the way to secure employment.

In particular, the concept of liminality enables our analysis to recognise the subjective register that captures the anxiety and uncertainty that many of our participants felt, as well as recognising the work young adults do to understand themselves as productive workers, despite their circumstances. In anthropological work (see Horvarth et al., 2015), liminality has been characterised as both a period of transition or becoming and a time of heightened risk or danger. The movement between two states—childhood and adulthood in the work of scholars such as Turner (1967), and unemployment and secure employment in our work and that of Furlong et al. (2018)—is fraught with risk and danger, lest the process not result in the socially desirable outcome. While the liminality of insecure employment was, for our participants, frustrating and anxiety inducing each time they completed survey questionnaires, the most striking aspect of this experience is its protracted nature. The extended period of liminality represented by several years in insecure employment meant that participants could not make plans, and in many cases were hampered in their desires to meet milestones such as homeownership and family formation (see Cuervo & Fu, 2020). The protracted nature of our participants' experiences of insecure employment was also reflected in their subjective perceptions of it. As we have shown, many of the participants did not identify as being in “insecure employment” despite the material conditions associated with their employment (i.e. contract type) and despite reflecting on their anxieties related to their employment. The normalisation of this state is perhaps the clearest indication that it has been a reality that has far pre-dated the pandemic for some of our participants. Drawing on this finding, we propose the use of liminality to conceptualise a long-term state of in-betweenness in which the impermanence of precarity paradoxically becomes a near-permanent state, and to make visible both the structural and subjective dimensions of this experience. Building on this proposal, we contend that liminal and precarious experiences of employment need to be taken seriously in the design and implementation of policy, as they reflect the lives realities of an increasing proportion of youth and young adults (Churchill & Khan, 2021; Miranda & Alfredo, 2022). In particular, our findings dovetail with research on underemployment that has put forward definitions that encompass contract type, conditions and the relationship of employment to one's qualifications (for review, see Churchill & Khan, 2021), rather than focussing solely on whether respondents desire additional hours of paid work (for instance, see Chambers et al., 2021).

The analysis that we present in this paper is subject to limitations. The statistical results do not purport to represent the circumstances and experiences of all young adults in Australia, and future research could help explore the patterns and experiences of different subgroups of young adults systematically. A more dynamic examination of labour market experiences over time would also help refine the results and build on a more granular conceptualisation of temporality. This could be achieved by considering variation in young adults' labour market experiences both before and during the pandemic, as well as extending the temporal horizon beyond a five-year time span. There is also significant scope for future research to consider the life course impacts of prolonged liminal and precarious employment. As we have shown, those who are in precarious employment are more likely to report work-related difficulties and less likely to own their own home than their more securely employed counterparts. The increasingly extended nature of precarious employment means that the life course experiences of those in liminal,

precarious employment may diverge even further from the experiences of those who are in secure employment.

There is significant value in longitudinal work that allows experiences to be traced over time, both on the level of individual experience and aggregate experience of an age cohort. In addition to answering the critique of the present-oriented focus of much sociological work that has been made by both classic and contemporary thinkers, it shows that the meaning of crises, as well as individuals' vulnerability to them, is shaped not only by how they are positioned in relation to them, but also by how long a crisis of this type has been an aspect of their life. Ultimately, we use our longitudinal analysis to highlight the protracted nature of liminality and precarity for many young adults prior to and during the COVID-19 crisis. While the pandemic brought the problem of young people's insecure work into sharp relief, particularly for the general public, the persistent precarisation of youth and young adults' employment is best understood by linking the past with the present, and in so doing recognising the legacy of structural processes of inequality that consistently impact on young people in times of crisis.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Hernan Cuervo: Conceptualization; methodology; investigation; funding acquisition; writing – original draft; formal analysis. **Quentin Maire:** Conceptualization; methodology; formal analysis; investigation; writing – original draft. **Julia Cook:** Conceptualization; investigation; funding acquisition; writing – original draft; methodology; formal analysis. **Johanna Wyn:** Conceptualization; investigation; funding acquisition; writing – original draft; methodology; formal analysis.

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