

# Precarious employment, precarious life? A qualitative study exploring the perspective of temporary agency workers and their households

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## Abstract.

**BACKGROUND:** Previous research demonstrated the negative consequences of precarious employment for the health and well-being of employees. However, the broader social consequences of precarious employment are under-examined.

**OBJECTIVE:** This study explores the broader impact of precarious employment on the life course, family and social life of households. A multi-actor perspective is adopted, considering the perspectives of different household members.

**METHODS:** For this aim, in-depth (household) interviews among temporary agency workers in Belgium are conducted.

**RESULTS:** The results reveal that precarious employment influences the life course and family and social life in three ways: (1) by hindering or facilitating life course events and transitions of household members, (2) by influencing the daily life and household planning, and (3) by influencing the mood of household members.

**CONCLUSION:** The consequences of precarious employment reach further than the work environment; they impact the life course, and social and family life of workers. Moreover, precarious employment does not only influence the workers themselves, but also their household members, which is often forgotten in studies. Therefore, policy makers should consider the far-reaching consequences of precarious employment when developing (flexible) labour market policies.

Keywords: Temporary agency work, life course, family life, interviews

## 1. Introduction

Previous research demonstrated the negative consequences of precarious employment for the health and well-being of employees [1–7]. However, the broader social consequences of precarious employment, for example on (family) transitions, and family and social life, are under-examined. Moreover, while focussing on the precarious worker, most studies neglect the perspective and experiences of other household members. Therefore, this study focuses on the broader social experience of precarious employment at the household level, considering the

implications for the household. More specifically, this study investigates how households understand the relationship between precarious employment and its impact on the life course (e.g. life planning, family transitions), family and social life of household members.

There is increasing consensus that precarious employment should be defined as a multidimensional concept, encompassing different employment-related dimensions [7–9]. In the approach adopted in this study, precarious employment comprises six dimensions: (1) employment instability/job insecurity, (2) lack of economic sustainability (low

material rewards, few fringe benefits), (3) lack of workers' rights and social protection, (4) de-standardised/flexible working times, (5) lack of skill development, and (6) lack of empowerment (unequal power relations at work, lack of representation) [1, 6]. From a multidimensional perspective on precarious employment, each job can bear some features of employment precariousness. However, in some specific employment arrangements features of precarious employment tend to accumulate. In this study, the focus lies on temporary agency work in Belgium. It has been argued that temporary agency work is particularly prone to precariousness [6]. Temporary agency work tends to be related to high job insecurity [10, 11], low wages and few benefits [12, 13], unpredictable or irregular schedules [10], poor training opportunities [14], poor employee representation [15, 16] and higher chances of unfavourable social relations at work [13, 14]. Moreover, the triadic employment relationship involves a higher vulnerability to issues such as withholding mandatory rights, excessive or conflicting demands and problematic health and safety protection [12, 15, 17]. While temporary agency work is often characterised by several of the employment precariousness dimensions, its consequences for the individual worker and his/her household, family and social life heavily depend on the household configuration and the employment situation of other household members [18].

In the remainder of this article, first, the scope of temporary agency work and the way it is arranged in Belgium is discussed briefly. Second, an overview is given about what is already known about the impact of precarious employment on the life course, family and social life. Thereafter, the methodology used for this study is presented, followed by the results and the discussion.

### *1.1. Temporary agency work in Belgium*

In 2018, in Belgium, a daily average of 3.01% of the workforce was employed by temporary work agencies [19]. This only compels a small proportion of the workforce, but the share of temporary agency work is on the increase, and among the highest in Europe [19, 20]. Some groups are overrepresented in temporary agency work: i.e. male, young, blue-collar and lower educated workers and immigrants [19, 21].

In Belgium, the temporary agency sector is strongly regulated. Only licensed agencies are permitted to operate. Moreover, temporary agency work is allowed only in specific situations. Contracts are

of limited duration in all cases (usually daily, weekly or monthly). In addition, temporary agency workers are entitled to the same wage, benefits and social protection (e.g. end-of-year-bonus, holiday pay, paid legal holidays, paid sick days, unemployment benefits and pension accrual) than permanent workers performing the same job in the client-company. Temporary agency workers additionally qualify for work-life-balance-related rights, such as child allowance, maternity/paternity leave, parental leave and brief leave of absence (leave permitted due to circumstances such as a sick child) [22].

### *1.2. Precarious employment and the life course*

Chan and Tweedie [23] have shown how precarious employment is challenging the ability of young workers to progress through their life course and how it affects individual capacities to make long-term commitments and decisions, as insecurity delays life decisions [23]. Also precarious employment conditions of academic researchers heavily affect the workers' ability to plan for their futures [24]. Leaving the parental home is a first transition that is affected. Stone et al. [25] found that economic insecurity, defined by unemployment, working in temporary or part-time work, or being economically inactive, is associated with prolonged living in the parental home [25]. Moreover, employees on temporary contracts are often refused a mortgage [6]. Previous research has also documented a negative association of non-standard employment with union formation and creating stable couple relationships [24, 26, 27]. A possible reason is situated in the fact that for most people long-term commitments such as marriage require some job stability, financial security or realistic future career prospects [27, 28].

In addition, an instable employment status and perceived job insecurity negatively affect fertility [18, 24, 29–32]. According to Laß [18], temporary agency work relates to delayed first childbirth, especially when the female partner is in that situation [18, 31, 33]. Also, women with temporary contracts are less likely to give birth to a second child [34]. The impact of precarious employment on key life decisions like parenthood is not solely attributable to employment conditions; additionally, the institutional context is of importance [23]. Fertility rates for precarious workers vary across countries and social groups, suggesting that the life course of precarious workers is influenced by broader social, family and housing policies [23]. Additionally, also cultural values and social norms,

such as gender roles play a role [28]. In countries where childcare systems and parental benefits are strongly oriented towards the needs of permanent workers, families with precarious positions lack adequate access [31]. Moreover, childbearing can worsen the future employability of women who already find themselves in vulnerable labour market positions [31, 35]. The above findings are in line with the 'new household economics' theory of Becker [36]: a rational response to an uncertain labour market position is to work longer and harder to reduce job insecurity, while childbearing becomes subordinate to these employment-related goals [28].

Finally, precarious employment can influence the further career of employees. Some temporary agency workers in the study of Bosmans [6] complained that they are stigmatised as unreliable or lazy workers, or as workers who are unable to keep stable employment, preventing them from being contracted in permanent employment. On the contrary, also some positive effects regarding career opportunities, are found in the literature. Some studies highlight that temporary agency work provides workers with control over their career. Experienced professionals in the study by Kirkpatrick and Hoque [37] reported that they use agency employment to enhance their upward mobility. It provides them with skills and experiences perceived as useful for obtaining promotion [37].

### *1.3. Precarious employment and family and social life*

Pugh [38] paints a bleak picture, arguing that insecurity is affecting family and social life (in the USA) in a broad way. She argues that – faced with insecurity both at work and at home – people construct stronger walls between the two. They expect little from their jobs, blame themselves when it turns out bad in their employment career and place nearly all of their expectations for fulfilling connections on their intimate relationships with friends and family. When these yearnings do not meet their expectations, despair, sorrow and betrayal can grow [38]. The research of Lewchuk [30] suggests that precarious employment is associated with increased tensions and anxiety in households. One of the possible factors are non-standard working hours. Unpredictable, irregular schedules and less schedule control produce greater disruption to family life; can increase the risk of divorce; are related to interferences with non-work activities and perceived work-life conflict and have negative effects on the capacity to organise

family life effectively [32, 35, 39, 41]. Besides, the scheduling of participants' job searching or career-building activities can interfere with family time [42]. Another aspect is (financial) instability. There is quite some evidence for precarious employment to negatively affect fulfilling household activities and family dynamics, and to contribute to relationship difficulties and even partnership dissolution [18, 23, 32, 42]. Laß [18] found evidence for a cumulative disadvantage: a situation in which both partners experience employment insecurity is particularly detrimental. In contrast to most research on precarious employment, positive experiences such as flexibility, freedom and control over time, were reported as advantages of flexible work in some other studies [6, 43].

Precarious employment also causes challenges for raising children [23, 32, 42]. Economic insecurity may limit children's extracurricular activities, leading to feelings of guilt among precariously employed parents [32, 42]. The same holds for the inability to fulfil dual roles as parents and workers, because of irregular working hours [42]. According to Craig and Powell [44], parents who work non-standard hours spend significantly more time in paid work and have less time for housework and childcare than those who work standard hours. Non-standard work schedules seem to resort more impact on mothers than on fathers, even in the case when it is the father who holds the non-standard job. In such cases it are often the mothers who do more housework and routine childcare [44]. Finally, also men working in precarious employment are often disadvantaged if they want to take care of their children, since legislation denies their right to use parental leave or denies its exercisability [45].

Regarding social life, previous research demonstrates that precarious employment is related to social isolation [6, 30, 32, 42]. Moreover, not having a permanent workplace makes it more difficult to form workplace-based friendships [30]. Additionally, irregular working hours, split shifts and short-notice work schedule changes are socially disruptive [39, 40, 46].

## **2. Methodology**

To study the impact of precarious employment on the life course, family and social life of temporary agency workers and their households, a phenomenological perspective was chosen. This perspective allows to focus on the way individuals make sense of the consequences of precarious employment on the

life course and family and social life through their lived experiences and interactions [48].

### 2.1. Sample and recruitment

Dutch-speaking Belgian temporary agency workers and their household members were sampled. The household could include the temporary agency worker and all other household members living in the same house. The researcher always asked the temporary agency worker whether it was possible to include other household members in the interview. When this was not possible or not preferred, only the temporary agency worker was interviewed. Other criteria, namely socio-demographic characteristics (household composition, sex, age, educational level, occupational class) and whether or not they were in temporary agency work voluntarily (whether the employees prefer their status as a temporary agency worker above another employment situation, such as a permanent contract), were considered to ensure diversity in the sample. The included respondents' experience with temporary agency work varied from a couple of months to many years.

The participants were selected with the help of the Christian (ACV) and Socialist (ABVV) trade unions<sup>1</sup>. Advertisements about the study were distributed on social media and on their websites. In addition, personal e-mails were sent to temporary agency workers who were trade union members. Potential participants were asked to complete their contact details in an online form of which the content could only be retrieved by the researcher, or to contact the researcher by phone or e-mail. In addition, recruitment was done by means of word of mouth/snowball sampling. In total, 15 temporary agency workers and 6 other household members were recruited for an interview (end of 2019, beginning of 2020). Some were interviewed at the beginning of the COVID-19-crisis, but specific issues related to the crisis were not considered in this study. The characteristics of the 21 interviewees are presented in Table 1.

### 2.2. Procedures and analysis

Temporary agency workers (and their household members) were interviewed about their experiences

<sup>1</sup>In Belgium, trade unions serve, among other tasks, as payment institutions for unemployment benefits. Therefore, trade union membership is high [47]. In 2018, trade union density was 50,3% in Belgium (OECD data retrieved from <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TUD>).

related to precarious employment and the ways this interrelated with their life course, family and social life – and that of their household members. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured. The main topics of the interview-guide were the following: overview of the life course and working career and its influence on various transitions in life such as education, cohabitation, marriage, having children; how the employment position impacts their family life; and how the employment position impacts their social life. However, given the scarcity of qualitative data on this topic, an inductive approach was followed partly to allow research findings to emerge from the raw data [49, 50]. The interviews took place at the location that was most convenient for the interviewee(s) (e.g. interviewees' home, university buildings, virtually).

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded with Nvivo<sup>TM</sup> software. The data were coded thematically [49, 50]. After the interviews were read through, significant statements were detected and any patterns observed were sorted into codes [49, 50]. Codes were either developed deductively from past theory or inductively from the data. Afterwards codes were reviewed to develop an organised set of codes [49, 50]. The analysis was iterative, allowing the coding tree to evolve throughout the data collection and analysing process. After the codes were identified, the focus was directed towards code-integrity and links between codes were sought [49, 50]. To end, the results were integrated into an in-depth description of the phenomenon [48]. While analysing the data, the feelings of the participants and the meanings given to experiences got much attention, in line with the phenomenological approach [48]. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identity.

## 3. Results

From the results, three overarching themes emerge regarding the way precarious employment influences the life course, family and social life of households. These main themes and their sub-themes are presented in Table 2.

### 3.1. Hindering or facilitating the life course

Because one's employment situation is one of the most important factors giving stability in a person's life, many important life choices and events are conditionally depending on the employment situation. In this paragraph we overview several factors regarding

Table 1  
Characteristics of the interviewees

Interview	Household composition	Interviewees	Role in the household	Sex	Age	Employment status <sup>a</sup>	Educational level	Occupational class	Voluntariness <sup>b</sup>
1	Cohabiting couple	Zana	Partner	F	31	Temporary agency work	Tertiary	Blue collar	V
2	Married couple	Marcus	Husband	M	29	Temporary agency work	Tertiary	Blue and white collar	IV
		Lina	Wife	F	29	Student + unemployed	Tertiary	White collar	
3	Single, co-housing with a friend	Sandy	Housemate	F	44	Temporary agency work + student	Secondary	White collar	V
4	Married couple, 3 young children	Karel	Husband	M	51	Temporary agency work	Secondary	Blue collar	IV
5	Cohabiting couple	Mathias	Partner	M	45	Temporary agency work	Secondary	Blue and white collar	V
6	Married couple, 1 teenage child	Chantal	Wife	F	58	Temporary agency work	Secondary	White collar	IV
		Ron	Husband	M	63	Permanent work	Primary	Blue collar	
7	Married couple, 2 teenage children	Greta	Wife	F	49	Temporary agency work	Tertiary	White collar	V
8	Married couple, 3 adult children	Dirk	Husband	M	57	Temporary agency work	Primary	Blue and white collar	IV
		Linda	Wife	F	49	Permanent work	Tertiary	White collar	
		Jana	Daughter	F	20	Student	Student	Not applicable	
9	Married couple, 1 young child	Kyra	Wife	F	37	Temporary agency work	Tertiary	White collar	V
10	Married couple, 1 young child	Jessica	Wife	F	31	Temporary agency work	Secondary	White collar	IV
		Tom	Husband	M	27	Permanent work	Secondary	Blue collar	
11	Co-housing with 4 friends, has a girlfriend living apart	Olivier	Housemate	M	30	Temporary agency work	Tertiary	White collar	IV
12	Living together with 1 young child, has a partner living apart, has 2 other young children mainly living with her ex-partner	Clara	Mother	F	37	Temporary agency work	Primary	Blue collar	IV
13	Cohabiting couple	Alice	Partner	F	42	Temporary agency work	Tertiary	White collar	IV
14	Single, co-housing with 5 friends	Alex	Housemate	M	24	Temporary agency work	Tertiary	Blue collar	IV
15	Married couple	Tina	Wife	F	54	Temporary agency work	Secondary	Blue collar	IV
		Raf	Husband	M	55	Permanent work	Secondary	Blue collar	

<sup>a</sup>Many temporary agency workers had different employment statuses during the last years (e.g. temporary agency work, unemployed, indefinite or fixed-term contract, etc.). Here, 'temporary agency work' is mentioned, because this is the main reason why they were selected for the study. <sup>b</sup>V = Voluntarily employed in temporary agency work; IV = Involuntarily employed in temporary agency work.

Table 2  
Overview of themes

Main themes	Sub-themes
Hindering or facilitating life course events and transitions of household members	Access to financial resources and family transitions Affecting the choices of other household members Temporary agency jobs as career boost/orientation
Influence on daily life and household-planning	Appointments for private matters Raising children and childcare Spending time with family and division of household chores Holidays and other types of leave Social life Combination with other (leisure) activities
Influence on the mood of household members	Feelings of inferiority Influence on the mood of household/family members Influence on the worker's mindset Tensions in the household

the life course that were influenced by the employment situation of the respondents.

*Access to financial resources and family transitions.* A first example comes from Chantal and Ron. They wanted to get a loan for the renovation of their house, but the banks refused due to the financially instable position of Chantal. Dirk and his family testified that their car is 14 years old and probably needs to be replaced soon. However, due to Dirk's instable employment situation, they will not get a loan. In addition, it would be very hard to go to work without a car. In Jessica's and Tom's life, many important decisions were postponed because of financial insecurity: the renovation of their house, their marriage and having a second child, since they waited until Jessica would have a more stable contract (she recently is given a contract of limited duration). An instable employment position and financial insecurity are mentioned as the most important obstacles.

Because we had no savings, we were not able to continue with the renovation work. That bothered me, because I wanted to finish something and it wouldn't work because there was not enough money. That worried me all the time. (Tom, husband of Jessica)

For Alice and her former partner, Alice's insecure labour market position made them decide to postpone to have a child, and was later – from Alice's side – even a barrier to stop this relationship that has not been going well for a long time.

I talked about children with my ex-partner. My partner already had children, but I wanted a child of my own. We had postponed it because I worked as a temporary agency worker and because I had no security. (Alice)

*Affecting the choices of other household members.* The instable employment situation of one household member can also impact the employment-related choices of other household members. Tom wanted to change jobs while Jessica was a temporary agency worker. They decided together not to do this out of fear of ending up both in an instable employment situation. Another impact on life choices of family members is put forward by Jana. By being confronted with her dad's disadvantaged situation as a temporary agency worker, Jana feels extra motivated to obtain a good university degree to be able to get a good job later in life.

My parents have always emphasized that I have to study well. I don't want to go through the same situation. It encourages me to do the best I can, to get a good degree and hopefully find a good job later. (Jana, daughter of Dirk)

*Temporary agency jobs as career boost/orientation.* Employment situations that are often labelled as precarious, such as temporary agency work, can also facilitate the career of some individuals. Olivier, for example, first searched for a job that fits his diplomas and interests. Soon he realized that he lacked experience for his ideal job. Therefore, he started to search for a temporary job through an agency. He is now happy with his current agency-job, but considers it as a temporary strategic choice that allows him to gain experience and to build his career. After some time, he assumes his profile will be better fitting for the job of his dreams.

Temporary agency work is a side project to gain experience. It really is a purely transitional period. I know I'm not going to do this for years. (Olivier)

Similarly, for Alex, temporary agency work was a quick stepping stone into the labour market. It enabled him to rent a house with his friends instead of living with his parents again after he graduated.

Other interviewees who already had had different jobs used temporary agency work to explore what they want. Greta felt bad in one of her previous permanent jobs and suffered from a depression. She used temporary agency work to get her career back on track. Doing different jobs through an agency enables her to get to know the workplace and the colleagues, so she can decide whether she would consider to work as a permanent worker again in one of the companies.

After my bad experience in that permanent job, I felt like ‘I don’t want to work anywhere on a permanent basis anymore. I want temporary jobs. In that case, I shouldn’t attach myself to the colleagues’. The permanent job was stopped because of the colleagues, so I was like ‘You know what? I’m going to do temporary agency jobs’. It is temporary, and if things are not going well there, I know ‘This is my end date, I am gone and I start somewhere else’. So, I deliberately chose temporary agency work. I don’t want to pin myself down somewhere, and I can scan the work environment. And if they want me for a permanent job, I have been working in that company for a while and by then I know ‘how the people are like, how they organise everything there, what is the atmosphere, mentality among the people and so on’. That is all very important to me. (Greta)

Likewise, Zana used temporary agency work to gain experience and to check-out some work places to eventually find a place where she wants to stay. Both Zana and Greta have high levels of market power: they possess desired skills putting them in an advantaged position. Both have a partner who works, which is an additional buffer against financial insecurity.

With temporary agency work, you have to work a few days here, a few days there. The advantage is that you learn a lot. By working in different places, you also learn more about how the heads of department set up the schedules, how they interact with colleagues, and what activities they organise. (Zana)

Another positive story is the one of Sandy. Sandy worked as an administrative worker for years but she wanted a career switch. She decided to go back to school and is currently obtaining her bachelor’s degree. Because she needs the financial means, she decided to combine studying with working. Therefore, she chose to work as an administrative worker through a temporary employment agency. Temporary, part-time jobs are perfect in combination with

her studies. Her working hours are set in consultation with her employers to combine them with the class hours. When she graduates, she will search for another kind of job based on her new degree. Temporary agency work enabled her to give her life a new twist.

Temporary agency work was a conscious choice because I needed a transition period. You can’t just go from one sector to another – so you have to give yourself a little time to make that transition. And then I said ‘okay yes, the only solution is temporary agency work’. With the experience I already have, it will be very easy to find something – and it has always been very easy. I was just looking for a job, administrative and secretarial work. And my condition was: I want to be able to combine this with my studies. And I couldn’t do that full-time because then I couldn’t finish my studies. So that was the condition and that’s what those companies needed, like ‘We need someone for a few days a week.’ That’s perfect for me. (Sandy)

### 3.2. Daily life and household-planning

Not only big life events may be affected by precarious employment. Many interviewees additionally testified that job changes and job insecurity impacted their daily life and short-term planning.

*Appointments for private matters.* A first issue is raised by Tina. She testified that even a simple appointment with a medical doctor is difficult because of temporary agency work:

If you have to go to the doctor, for example a gynaecologist, you have to make an appointment weeks in advance – and by then, for example, you will be working in another job with different working hours. Then you have to reschedule that appointment and again wait for so long. It gets me stressed and it rattles my nerves. (Tina)

*Raising children and childcare.* A second problem is related to children. Jessica, who was pregnant at the time of the interview, did not know whether she would get a new contract when she wanted to return to work after her maternity leave. The related insecurity resulted in worries and practical problems related to childcare. It was impossible for her to plan her need for childcare much in front, while the waiting lists are long. As a consequence, she should reserve a childcare place by paying an advance, while she might

as well be unemployed after her maternity leave – so able to take care of her new-born herself. The upfront investment in childcare that she might need, presented an important dilemma to Jessica. Likewise, Clara, who lived mainly as a single mother, experienced difficulties to plan child care during holiday periods:

In the holiday periods, when you do not have job security, it is difficult, because you have to look for childcare and those people also like to know in advance. For the summer holidays you have to register the children in April or May. So that's not easy because you don't know 'Will I be employed, will I be unemployed?' and then it happens that you register them and end up at home without work. That is a bit double, because you have no income but you have to pay for the childcare because you have made a reservation. (Clara)

Moreover, both Kyra and Karel mentioned that they were not able to take up parental leave because of their status as a temporary agency worker. Specific conditions attached to many of these social benefits hamper temporary agency workers' eligibility in practice. Workers are entitled to apply for parental leave if they have worked for 12 months with an employer during the 15 months preceding the application. Since temporary agency workers often change jobs, often go through periods of unemployment and are regularly employed for short periods, it is often not possible for most of them to invoke this right.

The big disadvantage that I do find – and I have now come up against that with becoming a mum – is that I checked with the temporary employment agency whether I am actually entitled to parental leave. They said 'We can offer you parental leave but then you must have worked continuously for us for a year, which is impossible for me because of all my days off. An additional difficulty is that if I want to take those 4 months of parental leave, that I also have to work at a company where I can do that, and I don't have an annual contract with a company where I can agree 'Now I will not work for 4 months'. An employer will not be happy at all if you sign a year under a temporary agency contract and then say 'I would like to take 4 months off'. (Kyra)

For Karel, the situation was different. He had difficulties to enforce his rights. Karel was entitled to parental leave, but his employer first lied and said

that this was not the case. Later on, his employer(s) simply did not want to grant him the parental leave. He likes his job, which restrains him to give up the job or to protest out of fear of getting dismissed. This powerless position was mainly due to the subsequent weekly contracts he is offered. The parental leave he requested was aimed to support his son with learning difficulties. So, his powerless employment position prevented him from adequately supporting his son – something that was moreover hard to understand for his wife.

Wednesday is important to me because my son is going to the 1st year of secondary school, and then I could follow his schoolwork. I don't need a day off for myself, but it's for educational reasons: my son is still in speech therapy, he has dyslexia and the help I could offer is really important. (Karel)

*Spending time with family and division of household chores.* Also, more generally, spending time within family can be affected. Marcus felt very tired of working in temporary jobs and in the meantime always searching for new jobs and opportunities. As a consequence, Lina and Marcus could spend less time with each other. Another thing were the household chores. Lina (who recently immigrated to Belgium) did all these tasks during this difficult period. Although she was not very happy doing these tasks, she knew it was only temporary and she felt it was her duty because she was not able to work legally in the country. This was one of the ways to make life easier for Marcus because he had to earn the money for their family.

If you are there all day and you know that somebody is working all day – I mean it is not cool to be like 'We need to totally split this up'. Because you feel bad, it is like 'I'll do this part, you are doing this part'. But no, it is not my favoured task. It is nicer to share the household chores... It was like a non-spoken agreement. But it wasn't awesome. Because also he wouldn't have energy to do anything. (Lina, wife of Marcus)

*Holidays and other types of leave.* Holidays also popped up to be problematic. When temporary workers are hired during busier periods or to replace a worker, it is difficult for them to take a holiday. They are entitled to this right, but employers sometimes state beforehand to agency workers that they cannot take holidays – for example in cases when they are hired to bridge the busy period. Dirk said that he almost always finds jobs during the summer months as many permanent employees are then on vacation.



However, he would also like to go on vacation during the summer – certainly because his wife works in education and his children study. Everyone in his family is at home when he has just started working. This is frustrating because it is impossible for them to plan a family vacation. Moreover, vacation does not feel the same for some temporary agency workers and their family. Marcus testified he was less relaxed because of job insecurity: “You never know whether you have a job when you return from holiday and how long it will last”.

In addition, other kinds of leave can be problematic for temporary agency workers. Chantal’s father needed care because of a surgery. She would have liked to take leave to look after her father, but this was not possible since she was hired to bridge a busy period in the client-company. Not accepting the job at all was not an option for financial reasons. Asking to take leave during the assignment would lower her chances of getting a permanent contract at the client-company.

My father is 82 years old and has undergone surgery in the hospital. A friend took care of him, because I couldn’t say ‘I’m taking some days off’ at work. I can’t take care of my father, because then I wouldn’t be able to claim a permanent contract. So that’s quite drastic... If you have a permanent job and you say ‘My father is seriously ill’ then you can take time off, but you can’t do that if you’re a temporary agency worker. If that’s the case they just won’t hire you anymore... (Chantal)

*Social life.* Another theme raised in the interviews is social life. The amount of social activities and hobbies can decline because of being tired of working and searching for jobs during free time. Also, financial insecurity can detain social activities, such as a diner in a restaurant. Moreover, planning problems can occur. Some interviewees testified not to plan social activities because not knowing whether they will have a job that day. Many interviewees mentioned that ‘any sign of not being flexible’ – for example refusing a weekend assignment because of a planned social activity – is usually not appreciated by temporary employment agencies. Flexibility seems not to be mutual it appears:

Actually, I never have evenings off to plan a social activity. Either I have to get up at 5AM, or I work until 10PM – I mean week evenings – I do have weekends of course. But beware – and this is due to temporary agency work – when there is a peak

they often ask to come and work on Saturdays. That’s on a voluntary basis... But all the temporary agency workers say ‘yes’ – you don’t really dare to say ‘no’. So, then you lose another evening. And if you have the early shift on Monday, you don’t actually have any evening to plan anything. (Alex)

*Combination with other (leisure) activities.* For others, the combination with hobbies or volunteering work becomes difficult. Dirk gives volleyball training to children at fixed times during the week. Many blue-collar temp agency jobs require flexible and overtime hours that are not possible to combine with volunteer work. However, Dirk made the rule for himself not to drop the volleyball and only to accept jobs that are combinable with his volunteering duties, by which his chances to get new assignments decrease.

For Mathias, the situation is different. Temporary agency work facilitates his planning because it is flexible. His hobby is artistic work. Unfortunately, he does not find enough projects to make a living of his passion. However, temporary agency jobs enable him to earn money during times that he does not have artistic projects. When something interesting pops up, he easily changes his planning by giving up his temporary agency job to work on an artistic project. For Mathias, temporary agency work is a flexible means to earn enough money while keeping his focus on his artistic projects.

Another positive example comes from Kyra. Kyra needs some challenge and new vibes in her working life and combines three different jobs. Actually, she is a freelancer with three more or less fixed jobs. She makes her own planning, combining the three jobs. She can choose to be self-employed, however she chose to be contracted through a temporary employment agency which serves as her official employer. This is more interesting for her in terms of social protection (e.g. temporary unemployment periods, maternity leave). In combination with the permanent, secure job of her husband, this gives her a feeling of security, while she can still work in a very flexible way, doing different jobs.

Now I manage my own agenda. So, there are no more large blocks of 3 or 4 months that possess my agenda like it used to be and that I felt it was impossible to handle anymore (she worked on big projects before). If I see next week in my calendar ‘Okay, this is really too much’, then I have to cancel a day for someone and that is more doable than saying ‘I can’t do this anymore’ halfway through

a big project. So that puts less pressure on me and I manage my own agenda more. And I can take a day off more often, while for those big projects I was dependent on the schedule that someone externally imposed on me. Now I calculate for myself ‘I can take it easy for a month now because it has been tough and I can recharge my batteries for next month and also spend more time with my family and friends.’ (Kyra)

Likewise, Sandy benefits from the flexibility in temporary agency work. It enables her to change working days and hours depending on her schedule at school.

### 3.3. Precarious employment, ‘precarious mood’?

Next to life course events and planning difficulties, precarious employment can also affect the self-respect, mood and mental well-being of workers and their families.

*Feelings of inferiority.* Some interviewees had the impression that being a temporary agency worker is ‘low status’ and saw themselves as inferior. The inferior self-image of many temporary agency workers is reaffirmed by concrete actions on and beyond the shop floor. Chantal complained not being informed about decisions in the client-company. She does not feel part of the company. Another complaint was that many firms did not invest in proper training for their temporary agency workers. Moreover, some interviewees testified that temporary agency workers often have to do the tasks the permanent workers refuse to do such as the dirty jobs or work at unsocial hours.

Moreover, Dirk testified that the client-company planned a social activity for their employees, but he – as a temporary agency worker – was not invited. This gnaws at him, but on the other side he does not want to attach to colleagues too much, because it is very plausible that he will not remain in the job. He wants to avoid the pain of losing good colleagues.

Every time, you have to start over and over again. At company x, on Wednesday afternoon the colleagues go out for lunch together at a restaurant – but that is a group of friends, they have been working together for 10 years – and you get in between... And I don’t want to do that... I’m not going to develop a strong friendship if you know that you possibly may not come next week. Moreover, I think that there is too much laughter with me, with temporary agency workers in general. Behind our back they laugh at us because we have

done the work and that we have to pack up again. (Dirk)

Marcus talked about a certain connection between the temporary agency workers. They feel that they are all ‘in the same shit’ – what shapes a connection, although it is a negative identity based on feelings of inferiority.

There was even a very ‘interesting’ division. The foremen had yellow t-shirts, the permanent employees had red t-shirts and the temporary agency workers had blue t-shirts. So, you immediately saw the differences. And between temporary agency workers there was some kind of respect – because we were actually the lowest of the lowest – so to speak – but at the same time, if you saw someone with a blue t-shirt, it was like, ‘Okay, we’re sitting together in the shit’ – so to speak. So, there was some kind of brotherhood. (Marcus)

Feelings of inferiority often become worse or ‘confirmed’ because of actions of others beyond the work context. Many agency workers worry about what others think about them. They have the impression that people think they are inferior. Jessica, for example, feels uncertain about herself. She is ashamed about telling friends or acquaintances that she is a temporary agency worker – even though people don’t judge her literally.

Getting unemployment benefits... When you say that to someone... ‘Where do you work?’ ‘I don’t work’ – That’s a shame... And if you say you work as a temporary agency worker, that’s a shame too. I feel ‘less’ towards other people who have had a permanent contract with a company for years – and then I have to say (with a small voice) ‘I am a temporary agency worker’. A temporary agency worker is like a small pawn, a little helper. (Jessica)

Many interviewees testified that people asking about whether they will have a permanent contract makes them feel stressed and frustrated:

It is difficult for older people to understand ‘temporary agency work with the option of getting a permanent position’ and that almost in every job you have to start as a temporary agency worker and that there are no permanent contracts anymore, or very rare. And they are always after me: ‘Did you already find a job? Have you had another interview for a job?’ That stresses me. (Chantal)

*Influence on the mood of household/family members.* In addition, other family members can suffer from the situation. Jana, the daughter of Dirk, testified that all her friends seem to have parents with ‘good jobs’. Those friends cannot understand the situation going on in her family. As a consequence, she almost never talks about this with her friends. It feels unjust because she thinks her family does not deserve this situation. She feels especially sad for her father because he is really trying hard to find a permanent job.

The parents of all my friends have a permanent job. Sometimes I really think ‘Why are we not lucky – is my father not lucky once after so many years to get a good permanent job’. There are so many people who do, you see... Yes, I mind. And above all, it has been 8 years – so I didn’t realize that before – but now I realize. So most of my life has been like this. What I remember is this situation. Most of my friends’ parents have really good jobs too. I don’t think they can imagine how it feels to be in our situation. So, talk about that... yes, I can say it once and they can say something about it, but I always think ‘You can’t imagine how it feels anyway’. (Jana, daughter of Dirk)

Even the extended family can be affected by the temporary position of a worker. Jessica told us that her mother is very worried about her daughter’s future. For Jessica, it is not pleasant to listen to her mother’s concerns, always questioning when she will get a permanent position. This reaffirms her feelings of inferiority and uncertainty.

My mother also continuously asks ‘When do you get a permanent contract?’ As a mother you are also panicking because you know there is a child, a household, and so on. She thinks ‘What if my daughter becomes unemployed? How will she manage it financially?’ That is causing her stress. (Jessica)

*Influence on the worker’s mindset.* Moreover, being a temporary agency worker and having been confronted with many setbacks and lies from employers, can also affect people’s mindset in general. Dirk is already involuntary employed in different jobs as a temporary agency worker for 8 years. His goal is to get a permanent contract. This has been promised to him many times, but it always turned out to be a lie. This is frustrating him enormously and even makes him suspicious and mistrustful. He does not trust

employers and politicians, doesn’t expect anything from them anymore and is worrying a lot.

He has become very mistrustful. A few weeks ago, he said he felt at work that it was going to be done. It was a stressful period. Because someone had said something and he had – I think – picked it up a bit differently. But I think it is normal for him to become suspicious after all these years, and after all the times that they promised him that he will get a permanent contract while it will not happen anyway. (Linda, wife of Dirk)

You always see the same thing: with each of these new rules, employers find shortcuts. They benefit more and more from the people. That is my thought today. And that is because of doing temporary agency work, that I really view everything too negatively. I think employers are only concerned about making profit. I really think that is not correct. It really makes me sick. (Dirk)

*Tensions in the household.* For Tina and Raf, temporary agency work dominated their family life and time together in a negative way, since Tina was always worrying about her employment status.

You notice tension in the household. She is constantly occupied with her employment status, even in the evenings – it’s not just during the day – and there isn’t much else talked about anymore in our family. And then she has a job interview or then she starts to work somewhere – maybe only for 1 or 2 weeks – and then she is already looking for other jobs – that is not really pleasant. And if I am away for work for periods myself, then there is even more stress. For the family that is actually not nice either. (Raf, husband of Tina)

Because of an accumulation of frustrations, some temporary agency workers or household members take out their frustration on their families. Her temporary work status was sometimes used as an accusation in family conflicts between Clara and her partner:

Temporary agency work is sometimes used as a blame – like, if there was a discussion, he said ‘You should look better for a permanent job, because you have only a temporary agency job’. So temporary agency work remains having a negative undertone. (Clara)

Furthermore, Dirk and Jessica admitted that they are often in a bad mood and this affects their families too. This is for example expressed in intolerance or

anger against family members. Jana and Linda testified that they felt sorry for Dirk. They understand his frustration, feel compassion, and feel that he is caught in a powerless situation. Although the whole family knows that Dirk is a hard worker and that he should not blame himself for his employment situation, he feels bad about it and deals with it by being sarcastic.

You always fall into the same trap – because you always believe that you will get a permanent contract. I give myself 110%. And during those first 6 or 8 weeks they constantly say ‘Dirk is a good worker’ – and colleagues say ‘He learns everything in 2 days, he does everything’ – in fact you are like superman – because in a short period of time you can do all the work of that person who has been working there for years and is on leave. But at the end of the ride, they say ‘The regular colleague is back, sorry, you shouldn’t come anymore’. And some would then dare to say ‘We are not satisfied with your work anyway’ – after saying for 8 weeks that you are a very good worker. Then they shouldn’t make too much noise here at home – because that’s what my daughter – way too well-behaved now – doesn’t want to say, I guess. It’s true, huh? (Dirk)

Yes. And especially if you are in between 2 jobs. That’s really, phew – yes that’s really not pleasant. He’s really frustrated then. And also – it is annoying if you want to do something, then he says ‘Pay it yourself, I don’t have a job. I can’t afford it’ (in a sarcastic tone). He really isn’t a pleasant person then. (Jana, daughter of Dirk)

Yes, and the volleyball is really an outlet for me. If I didn’t have that, I think it would have exploded here regularly. (Dirk)

#### 4. Conclusion

This study contributes to the existing literature by illustrating that the consequences of precarious employment reach further than the work environment. In contrast to former studies, this is the first study to present the different consequences for the life course, social and family life of workers and their households all together in an integrated, in-depth qualitative study. For most workers the effects are negative, but positive examples also exist and are illustrated by the results. Moreover, this study highlights that precarious employment does not only

influence the workers themselves but also their household members.

Three main themes characterising the wider social and family life and life course of precarious workers and their households were revealed. First, precarious employment can hinder or facilitate life course events and transitions of household members. Temporary agency workers and their household members testified that making larger investments can be a difficult issue. Also, other life course milestones such as marriage, divorce and getting children were postponed. The precarious employment situation of one household member can have an impact on life choices of other household members, such as their ability to change jobs. In contrast, for some, temporary agency work enacted as an enabling factor in their careers. Second, precarious employment can influence daily life and household-planning. Temporary agency workers and their household members testified about problems with taking holidays and leaves, childcare, taking up parental leave, time spent with their family or friends and the division of household chores. Part of these problems are because of the ‘work for labour’ [51] many temporary agency workers are confronted with. They have to go to work and, in the meantime, in their free time they have to search for other jobs – which can be stressful and time-consuming. Moreover, statutory rights – like paid holidays or government-provided leaves – can be difficult to achieve because of the ‘informal expectation’ of employers that temporary agency workers do not invoke such rights during an assignment. However, again, for others temporary agency work is valued as a flexible way to combine a supplementary income with their hobbies, a passion or another job from which their ‘main professional identity’ is derived. Third, precarious employment can influence the mood of temporary agency workers and their household members. Many temporary agency workers felt inferior compared to permanent workers. Moreover, some worried about what other people think about them and got stressed because of recurring questions about their insecure employment situation. In a socio-economic context dominated by a neoliberal, meritocratic discourse, in which people are expected to be responsible for what they achieve [52] – this can be very painful, because workers can feel – often wrongly – individually responsible for their failure. Moreover, feelings of frustration and anger can also cause friction in households or invoke stress upon other household members. The negative mood or coping behaviours of precarious workers can

in turn negatively affect family life. These findings are in line with the work of Sennett [53] who argues that people have to cope with new concepts of flexibility and ever-changing employment conditions that are seemingly presenting new opportunities of self-fulfilment to workers, but in reality, are undermining their emotional and psychological well-being. However, in contrast to for example the study results of Pugh [38] in the USA, most workers in Belgium do not blame themselves in the first place and are still implicitly aware of the structural factors that are constraining their lives. This awareness, however, does not necessarily take away their feelings of inferiority. In addition, just like in the findings of Pugh [38], some of them seem not to expect much from their employers or governments anymore, due to many disappointments.

A limitation of this study is found in the difficulties encountered to convince temporary agency workers for a group interview including other household members instead of an individual interview. Most temporary agency workers felt that they could speak for their household members. Consequently, only part of the interviews included other household members. Furthermore, the COVID-19 crisis made it more difficult to find respondents for the study. Although this study is done among Belgian temporary agency workers, the ways precarious employment influences the life course, the family and social life and the mood of workers and their household members found in this study, are likely transferable to other countries and other forms of precarious or non-standard employment (as already indicated by studies that merely focus on the perception of precarious workers themselves, e.g. [24, 42]). However, nuances may exist depending on institutional and cultural factors. Similar research in other contexts can confirm this hypothesis. In addition, further research can dig deeper in the broader social consequences of precarious employment on households by for example organizing a longitudinal qualitative study in which precarious workers and their household members are interviewed several times. This can reveal new insights in whether and how their perspectives change over time.

A number of policy recommendations can be formulated based on the results of this study. First of all, non-standard employment legislation embodies ‘standard employment relationship-centrism’ [54]: it is usually based on the context of a standard employment relationship. If flexibility is put forward as a pursuable goal on the labour market,

non-standard workers, such as temporary agency workers, should not only get equal rights compared to standard employees, but should also have the same possibility to enforce them. This study clearly showed that the problem of enforceability of rights is paramount. This can cause practical and social problems for families and can affect their life choices and transitions. The cumbersome accessibility of parental leave or childcare discussed in this paper are only two examples of a general pattern. All in all, still much of the (employment) regulation seems not to consider flexible working careers. As a result, flexible workers in many instances find themselves in a disadvantaged situation compared to ‘standard’ workers. Inequalities are even more prominent in periods of crisis. COVID-19 and the related measures to contain the virus, hit precarious workers particularly hard. This clearly demonstrates the need for a more inclusive social protection system, in which non-standard workers are really on equal grounds with standard workers. Moreover, the introduction of a universal basic income might be an option, because it can make flexible workers and their families more financially secure and provide them from postponing crucial life events like marriage or childbearing. Second, policy makers should consider the far-reaching consequences of precarious employment when considering further ‘labour market flexibilization’ in Belgium and beyond. The impact of precarious employment reaches further than the individual workers concerned. Also other household members and for example extended family members can be affected by the consequences of precarious employment. This makes precarious employment a bigger problem than might be expected when only looking to the numbers of for example non-standard or precarious employment.

### **Ethical approval**

The study was performed in accord with the Declaration of Helsinki of 1964 and its later amendments. Approval for the study was obtained from the Ethical Committee for Human Sciences of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (approval number ECHW\_176.02, date 02/05/2019).

### **Informed consent**

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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