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A distaste for insecurity: job preferences of young people in the transition to adulthood

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Given the trend towards labour market flexibility in various European countries, this article examines whether the offered type of employment contract has an impact on young people's ratings of the attractiveness of a job. It empirically assesses the notion that young people's preference for secure employment increases as they transition into adulthood. We conducted a factorial survey among a representative sample of 1,025 people aged 18–35 years old in the Netherlands. Participants were asked to evaluate hypothetical job offers. Results show that, compared with a permanent contract, the offer of a temporary contract for 3 years has a small negative effect on young adults' job ratings, whereas offers of an agency contract or an on-call contract have a large negative effect. In line with our predictions, this preference for job security is stronger for men and women who have left the parental home or who have entered parenthood. For men, we also find that their preference for job security is even stronger if they have entered a romantic relationship. These findings suggest that young adults regard insecure employment undesirable, but that, based on their overrepresentation in non-standard employment, their preferences are often not met.

Introduction

Given the trend towards labour market flexibility in various European countries, young adults have a hard time obtaining stable employment (Chung, Bekker and Houwing, 2012). In the wake of the Great Recession, there has been increased scholarly attention on the effect of insecurity in the work domain on outcomes in the family domain (Laß, 2020; Vignoli, Tocchioni and Mattei, 2020b; Alderotti *et al.*, 2021; van Wijk, de Valk and Liefbroer, 2021). In this literature, it is argued that young adults postpone long-term commitments such as getting married or having children, when in their working lives they are confronted with economic uncertainty and insecure jobs (Vignoli *et al.*, 2020a). This insecurity stems from different types of flexible employment contracts that have collectively been referred to as 'time-limited' (Alderotti *et al.*, 2021), 'temporary' (Vignoli, Tocchioni and Mattei, 2020b; van Wijk

et al., 2021), or 'non-standard' (Laß, 2020). However, a different line of research has posited that the effects of being in temporary or flexible employment on individuals might be influenced by attitudes and preferences, such as whether or not the specific type of employment was an active choice (De Cuyper and De Witte, 2007, 2008). Some types of flexible jobs might be attractive for individuals who are focusing on parenthood or other care tasks (Schippers, 2019). Despite its relevance, e.g., to the process of family formation, little is known about young adults' preferences regarding jobs that offer different degrees of security. This article presents evidence on the extent to which different types of employment contracts impact the attractiveness of job offers to young adults: defined as people aged 18–35 years old. We empirically assess the notion that young people's preference for secure employment increases as they transition into adulthood. The article's focus is on

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degrees of ‘flexibility’ in the employment relationship between employer and employee as specified by the underlying employment contract.

Empirical evidence on the importance of job security for young adults’ job preferences is relatively scarce. [Başlevent and Kirmanoğlu \(2013\)](#) show based on data from the European Social Survey that job security was considered the most important job attribute for choosing a new job in almost all of the participating countries and that job security was deemed equally important across ages. [Guillot-Soulez and Soulez \(2014\)](#) conducted conjoint analysis among a homogenous sample of French business students. They show that respondents preferred having a permanent contract over a short-term contract and that job security was the attribute that best predicted students’ overall job preferences. In a large-scale factorial survey based on a representative sample of Dutch people aged 18–70, [Conen and De Beer \(2020\)](#) asked respondents to rate the appeal of hypothetical job offers: offers that differed primarily in terms of the likelihood that they would lead to permanent employment with an employer. They observed that all respondents, irrespective of their age, preferred permanent employment, but that the aversion towards temporary contracts that do not provide stability was particularly pronounced among respondents aged 18–34 ([Conen and de Beer, 2020](#)).

In survey research, job preferences are often measured in relation to respondents’ current employment status (e.g. [Hoofman et al., 2019](#)). Consequently, the unique impact of different types of employment contracts on job preferences is difficult to examine because people’s current employment status tends to be the result of other unobserved individual characteristics. Besides, survey data do not provide information on which employment types are likely to be dismissed, for information about these judgements is usually not registered ([Auspurg and Gundert, 2015](#)). Furthermore, it is well known that young adults are an extremely heterogeneous group. Some people within this age bracket have just left their parental home to pursue educational ambitions, whereas others share their life with a partner and perhaps started a family of their own. The process of transitioning into adulthood is likely to affect young adults’ job preferences. Yet, the above-mentioned studies did not investigate group differences among young adults. Furthermore, types of flexible employment contracts clearly differ when it comes to the level of security that they provide ([Mattijssen and Pavlopoulos, 2019](#)). For instance, a fixed-term contract for multiple years provides a higher degree of job security than a fixed-term contract for 1 year. Moreover, on-call contracts without a guaranteed number of working hours provide a lower degree of income security as compared

to fixed-term contracts with fixed working hours. Few studies on job preferences so far distinguished between the impact of various types of flexible employment contracts (for a notable exception, see [Conen and de Beer, 2020](#)).

This article addresses the following two research questions: (i) To what extent does young adults’ rating of the attractiveness of a job differ by the type of employment contract that is offered? (ii) To what extent do young adults’ preferences regarding types of employment contracts depend on the course of their transition to adulthood? To study the direct influence of the offered contract type on young adults’ job ratings, we conducted a factorial survey, also known as a vignette experiment, among a representative sample of 1,025 people aged 18–35 years old in the Netherlands. The types of employment contracts that were included in the experiment are as follows: a permanent contract, a temporary contract for 3 years, a temporary contract for 1 year, a contract via an employment agency, and an on-call contract. The term ‘flexible’ is used to refer to employment relations in which employees do not have a permanent, open-ended employment relationship with the organisation within which they perform their daily work. To examine the heterogeneity in job preferences among young adults, the process of transitioning into adulthood is operationalized based on the structuring influence of key life events, such as having left the parental home ([Liefbroer and Toulemon, 2010](#)).

The present study makes three contributions to the literature on employment with flexible contracts and individual-level economic uncertainty. First, the study design distinguishes between various types of flexible employment contracts that differ in the degree of job security they provide. We can therefore potentially observe a sliding scale with contracts that provide a lower degree of security being considered increasingly less desirable. This examination of the heterogeneity among types of flexible contracts moves the discussion on young adults’ job preferences beyond the crude distinction between ‘permanent’ and ‘temporary’ employment. Second, our research acknowledges that changes in the family domain can affect preferences in the work domain and that these mechanisms may work differently for men and women. We therefore formulate and test hypotheses regarding the differential impact of insecure employment offers on young adults’ job preferences according to their life phase. By examining gender-based differences, we heed the request by [Vignoli et al. \(2020a\)](#) for more attention to group-specific analyses when it concerns the topic of employment uncertainty. Third, by focusing on preferences regarding job security, we aim to illuminate the distinction between actively chosen and grudgingly accepted employment conditions among young adults. In their meta-analysis,

Alderotti *et al.* (2021: p. 893) pointed out that few studies on employment instability and family formation distinguished between voluntary and involuntary employment conditions. Job preferences are a micro-level indicator for individual decisions regarding employment (Mills and Blossfeld, 2005). Our choice of a factorial survey design allows us to assess the effect of the offered contract type on job preferences separate from young adults' previous life experiences.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Employment contracts and people's need for security

Young adults' rating of the attractiveness of a job depends on the specific attributes of that job. One attribute that is highly important in the qualitative assessment of a job is the degree of security it provides (Konrad *et al.*, 2000; Gallie, 2003; Başlevent and Kirmanoğlu, 2013; Guillot-Soulez and Soulez, 2014). This finding has been explained based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory in which safety and security are seen as fundamental human needs that demand satisfaction most immediately (Başlevent and Kirmanoğlu, 2013). When individuals are asked to evaluate jobs based on several attributes, they will first look to fulfil their basic needs, which is why the degree of provided security will be one of the most influential attributes. Within the context of work, the concept of security has several dimensions that refer to different structural circumstances. The two dimensions of security that are relevant for our study are job security and income security. Job security refers to assurance of prolonged employment with an employer and thus signals protection from the threat of unwanted unemployment. Income security refers to the assurance that engaging in paid work results in a relatively stable amount of monetary reward and signals protection from the threat of poverty.

Previous research has shown that jobs based on different types of employment contracts also differ in terms of the level of employment and income security that they provide in practice (Mattijssen and Pavlopoulos, 2019). In countries with extensive employment protection legislation (EPL) such as the Netherlands, a job based on a permanent employment contract is likely to signal to jobseekers that it will provide both high job and income security. The offer of an open-ended permanent contract indicates the employer's intention of establishing a longer-term employment relationship that offers employees perspective on continued employment and close firm linkage (Rouvroye *et al.*, 2022). Permanent contracts are also subject to numerous national standards with regards to the number of guaranteed working hours and the composition of

salaries and additional benefits. Based on Dutch EPL, jobs offered on temporary contracts should, at least in theory, provide the same employment conditions as jobs offered on permanent contracts (Rijksoverheid, 2022). A job based on a temporary contract is likely to signal high-income security, but limited job security. Given that the period of employment is fixed from the start of the agreement, the level of provided job security depends on the length of the contract. Employment agencies are subject to a different type of EPL that is specifically tailored to provide employers operating in this sector of the labour market with more opportunities to lay off staff members. As a result, jobs based on a contract with an employment agency may signal low job security and, given a fluctuating number of paid hours, low-income security. Jobs based on on-call contracts most likely signal neither job nor income security. This type of employment agreement does not provide employees with any legal guarantee regarding the duration of the involvement with an employer nor about the yields that can be expected from engagement in work. Jobs based on on-call contracts have previously been labelled as 'bad jobs' because of their disadvantageous characteristics (Kalleberg, Reskin and Hudson, 2000). Based on these propositions, we put forward the following hypothesis about the relationship between the offered contract type and young adults' assessment of the attractiveness of a job.

Security hypothesis: the lower the degree of security provided by an offered employment contract, the lower young adults' job rating.

Job preferences along the transition to adulthood

The life-course perspective (Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe, 2003) emphasizes that changes in the family domain are likely to affect preferences in the occupational domain. Specific qualities of a job may be evaluated differently according to how employment is expected to fit into young adults' lives or what is needed from paid work. Preferences for job security may vary along different phases of young adulthood. In life-course sociology, becoming an adult is viewed as a formative process that is structured by social pathways (Buchmann and Kriesi, 2011). The emphasis is on the influence of specific life events, the timing of their occurrence and the roles and responsibilities that accompany them (Liefbroer and Toulemon, 2010).

This event-focused view on the transition to adulthood overlaps to some extent with theoretical accounts portraying this part of life as a period of identity development and socio-emotional maturation (Baltes, Staudinger and Lindenberger, 1999; Settersten, 2007; Arnett, 2014). The occurrence of key markers of

adulthood is also influenced by individual factors such as age, be it within a context of social age norms about the appropriate timing of major life events (Liefbroer and Billari, 2010).

The transition to adulthood is a ‘demographically dense’ life phase (Rindfuss, 1991: p. 494), with more changes occurring during these years than during any other stage in the life course. Young people are for instance likely to change their living arrangements. At some point in time, they leave their parental home to start living independently. In pursuit of work-related aspirations, some young people might decide to increase their level of educational attainment and continue their studies. Marital or relationship status is also subject to change. During their early adult years, many young people enter into longer-term relationships or get married. Between the ages of 18 and 35, fertility peaks. Consequently, it is during this period that most people become parents for the first time.

Preference for secure employment in relation to key life events

The transition from living with parents or caregivers to having an independent place of residence is generally considered the first marker of adulthood (Buchmann and Kriesi, 2011). In practice, ‘living independently’ can mean different things. Individuals may form a single-person household but they can also share a dwelling with housemates or with a romantic partner (Billari and Liefbroer, 2007). The decision to establish an independent residence is likely to increase young adults’ individual costs of living. For some young people (a large share of), these higher costs of living may be paid by their parents or are covered by student loans, unemployment benefits, or rent subsidies. However, we assume that the majority of young people perceive paid employment as the means to fulfil the long-term financial commitments of living outside of their parental home. We therefore expect secure paid employment that can bring in a steady flow of income to be deemed more important by young adults who have left the parental home as compared to those who live with their parents.

Entering into a relationship is considered another important marker of adulthood. Having a romantic partner might entail implicit or explicit requirements or obligations to that partner, such as helping them financially or providing (part of) the means to build a household together. Compared to being single, engaging in a romantic relationship thus extend an individual’s social responsibilities by including the welfare of the couple they are now part of. Financial security has been shown to be a concern within young people’s romantic relationships (Domene and Johnson, 2021). Secure involvement in paid work is one way

to show a romantic partner that one can bear those couple-related responsibilities. At the same time, the process of union formation and developments in the work domain are interrelated. Stable attachment to the labour market can increase men’s chances of finding a partner (Oppenheimer, 2003). Young adults who are single, but looking for a partner might anticipate the (financial) responsibilities of romantic partnership and this could increase their preference for secure employment. However, this preference for secure employment is likely to be more pronounced among those young adults who have a partner to whom they hope to stay attractive or to whom they might have made commitments as life companions. We therefore expect security of employment to be considered more important by young adults who are in a relationship as compared to those who are single.

Entry into parenthood is thought to be the hallmark of adulthood. A decent steady income, most often acquired through secure employment, is considered a precondition for starting a family. By having a first child, young adults adopt the status of ‘parent’ and this change is accompanied by the financial commitment of a long-term role as caregiver. For young people with children, being employed on flexible, short-term contracts can make it difficult to imagine their future, see possible paths for themselves and develop strategies to move their lives forward (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002; Vignoli *et al.*, 2020a). Employment instability may also complicate the decision to have more children (Alderotti *et al.*, 2021). Given the (financial) commitments tied to raising children, we expect secure paid employment that can bring in a stable income to be more important to young adults who have children when compared with young adults who do not.

In this discussion of structuring life events and their relation to preferences for job security, it is important to acknowledge the existence of gender-based societal expectations. Considering the potential differences between men and women with respect to their job preferences is especially relevant in relation to family formation events. Traditionally, the division of labour within a couple has been highly gendered, with men specialising in paid market-based work and women specialising in unpaid domestic work (Becker, 1981). However, in various European countries, gender-based differences in educational attainment and labour force participation among the youngest generations are relatively small (Merens and Bucx, 2018). In light of an increase in gender equality (Goldscheider, Bernhardt and Lappegård, 2015), it can be questioned whether a strict division of labour still applies to couples of young adults, especially in societies that are growing towards a more egalitarian couple model (Kalmijn, 2011). Nevertheless, empirical evidence shows that

Dutch couples display a relatively fixed pattern of a traditionally gendered division of paid and unpaid labour (Poortman and Van Der Lippe, 2009; van der Lippe *et al.*, 2011). We therefore assume that during socialization most boys and girls have learnt about gender roles that emphasize the male provider and female caregiver. For men, having a decently paid job and perspective on a stable work career is generally seen as a crucial asset to appear more attractive as long-term life companions (Kalmijn, 2011). Within a couple context, we therefore expect men to feel a stronger urgency to signal to their current partner that their future economic position is stable and that they can (or would be able to) provide for their family. Concerns about their economic status, although potentially less strong, also apply to men who are single.

Based on the above-mentioned expectations, we formulate the following hypotheses about the relation between the offered level of job security and young adults' job preferences.

Events hypothesis: Young people's preference for job security is stronger for those who (1) have left the parental home or (2) entered into a romantic partnership or (3) entered parenthood.

Gendered events hypothesis: Preferences for job security of young adults in group (2) or (3) are stronger for men as compared to women.

We do not have a priori expectations about differences between events (1), (2), or (3) in terms of the relative size of the hypothesized effect.

This research is situated within the institutional context of the Netherlands. The Dutch labour market is considered the birthplace of the economic policy concept of 'flexicurity', which combines an extension of employers' legal possibilities to hire workers outside of a standard employment relationship with the insurance of social security for those flexible workers (Wilthagen, 1998). In practice however, flexible employment arrangements are subject to a considerably lower degree of national regulation and protection (Rouvroye *et al.*, 2023). Compared with other European countries, employment protection for permanent workers in the Netherlands is high (OECD, 2020). Statistics Netherlands (2022) defines a flexible employment relationship based on the type of employment contract. All employment contracts other than an open-ended permanent employment contract are considered flexible employment. This definition excludes freelance contracts and the solo self-employed, which are treated separately. Over the past two decades, the share of flexible employment increased sharply. In 2019, 22 per cent of all Dutch employees worked in flexible employment. Among employees under the

age of 35, this percentage is considerably higher at 56 per cent. Dutch employers used various types of flexible contracts to employ younger workers such as temporary contracts for at least 1 year (15 per cent), temporary contracts for less than 1 year (6 per cent), contracts via an employment agency (6 per cent), and on-call contracts (29 per cent) (Statistics Netherlands, 2022). In 2021, the Netherlands ranked third in the EU on the Gender Equality Index, indicating a positive societal attitude towards equal opportunities for men and women (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021).

Data and methods

Data collection

To answer our research questions, we conducted a factorial survey (Auspurg and Hinz, 2015) in which young adults were asked to evaluate hypothetical job offers (Rouvroye and Henkens, 2023). Data were collected using the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) of Tilburg University (<https://www.lissdata.nl/>). The LISS panel is a probability-based representative sample of approximately 7,500 Dutch individuals who participate in monthly computer assisted self-administered interviews (CASI).¹ For the current study, panel members aged 18–35 were invited to participate over the period April–May 2021. Of the 1,384 invited panel members, 1,029 took part in the study and 1,025 completed the experiment (response rate of 74 per cent). Table 1 provides descriptive background information on the study's sample of respondents. The majority of the participants were female (61 per cent), and the mean age was 26.3 years old (range 18–35, SD = 4.85). About one third of the participants were students (32 per cent), the majority was employed (58 per cent) and a small share had other activities (10 per cent). Most respondents obtained either a high (45 per cent) or intermediate (40 per cent) level of education. When compared with the overall population of Dutch people aged 18–35, women and people with high educational attainment are modestly overrepresented in the study's sample whereas people with low educational attainment are modestly underrepresented (Statistics Netherlands, 2022).

A factorial survey combines survey questions with experimental methods and is considered especially suitable for uncovering the underlying structure of human judgements in social contexts (Rossi and Anderson, 1982; Lössbroek *et al.*, 2020; Karpinska, Henkens and Schippers, 2013). The usual procedure in this type of experiment is that participants see a brief, evocative description, a vignette, which contains information about a hypothetical situation. Participants are then prompted to judge the vignette. When designing

Table 1 Descriptive overview of vignette and respondent characteristics

		Mean (SD)	Min	Max	Proportion
Respondent characteristics					
Age		26.3 (4.85)	18	35	
Gender [0/1]	Women				0.61
	Men				0.39
Independent residence [0/1]	Lives with parents or in family home				0.37
	Living independently (with or without partner)				0.63
Relationship [0/1]	No partner				0.40
	Has partner or spouse				0.60
Parent status [0/1]	No children				0.85
	Has child(ren)				0.15
Paid work [0/1]	Not mainly involved in paid work				0.42
	Mainly involved in paid work				0.58
Education level [0/1, ref=]	Low				0.15
	Intermediate				0.40
	High				0.45
Background					
Permanent employment contract	Yes				0.36
	No				0.64
Main activity	Employed/ working				0.58
	Student				0.32
	Other				0.10
N respondents		1,025			
Vignette characteristics					
Contract type [0/1, ref=]	Permanent				0.20
	Temporary for 3 years				0.20
	Temporary for 1 year				0.20
	Via employment agency				0.20
	On-call contract				0.20
Supplementary pension [0/1]	Is accumulated				0.50
	Is not accumulated				0.50
Training opportunities [0/1]	Extensive				0.51
	Limited				0.49
Flexibility of working hours [0/1]	Small				0.50
	Large				0.50
Task flexibility [0/1]	Fixed tasks				0.50
	Varying tasks				0.50
Opportunity to work from home [0/1]	No				0.51

Table 1. Continued

		Mean (SD)	Min	Max	Proportion
Autonomy [0/1]	Yes				0.49
	Low				0.50
	High				0.50
Job rating		4.12 (2.44)	0	10	
N Vignettes		8,200			

these vignettes, it is important to keep the total number of descriptive characteristics (vignette *dimensions*) low because participants might otherwise have difficulty imagining the hypothetical situation (Auspurg and Hinz, 2015). The key benefit of a factorial survey lies in the fact that the detailed information (vignette *levels*) on the characteristics of the hypothetical situation presented on the vignette is randomized. Vignette experiments therefore allow researchers to study the unique, but simultaneous effects of a set of characteristics that in practice, due to multicollinearity, are often impossible to disentangle (Wallander, 2009).

Research design

Vignettes were presented in a tabular format, since real job vacancies also tend to list job characteristics.² The main characteristic or *dimension* of interest for this study is ‘contract type’, which had five possible *levels*: permanent contract, temporary contract for 3 years, temporary contract for 1 year, a contract via an employment agency, or an on-call contract. To make the vignettes more realistic six other characteristics were included: supplementary pension, assigned tasks, training opportunities, influence on working hours, the level of work autonomy (i.e. possibilities to determine how work is executed), and the opportunity to work from home. These dimensions each had two possible levels.

Table 1 lists the specifications of these levels as well as the proportion of vignettes containing each vignette level. Per vignette characteristic, each level occurred with the same frequency. The study had a full factorial design, so all possible 320 vignettes were evaluated by multiple different respondents.³ Regarding the number of rated vignettes per respondent, we aimed at maximizing statistical power while avoiding respondent fatigue (Auspurg and Hinz, 2015). Each respondent rated eight treatment vignettes, so 1,025 participants rated a total number of 8,200 vignettes.

At the start of the experiment, participants were asked to imagine that they were looking for (new) paid employment. They were informed that they would be shown a number of descriptions of hypothetical jobs and asked to indicate on an 11-point scale (range 0–10) ‘how attractive do you find this job for yourself?’. They

were also given the additional instruction that for each of the hypothetical jobs they could assume that it fitted their education and work experience (person-to-job fit), that it paid an appropriate salary, that the work would be enjoyable (work engagement), and that they would have nice colleagues. This information was provided to control for job characteristics that did not feature on the vignettes, but that are relevant during the initial stages of a job search. Before rating the vignettes participants were instructed and then reminded once again that they did not need to take their actual job or current work situation into account. To familiarize participants with the judgement task, they were first presented with a ‘practice’ vignette (Auspurg and Hinz, 2015). The characteristics of this training vignette were the same for all participants. This vignette was not included in the analytical sample. Figure 1. provides an overview of the participant instructions together with a random example of a vignette.

The response data from the vignette experiment were linked to survey data about respondents’ background characteristics: gender (man/woman), household composition⁴ (single/cohabiting without kids/cohabiting with kids/single with kids/other), position within the household (household-head/married partner/unmarried partner/child living at home/housemate/family member), whether they had a partner or spouse (*Do you currently have a partner?* yes/no), whether they had any children (*Did you ever have any children?* yes/no), and their main daily activity (e.g., salaried employment/going to school or studying/ paid freelancer). This information informed three separate respondent-level variables on ‘residential status’, ‘relationship status’ and ‘parental status’ as well as an indicator for whether their main daily activity was paid work. We also included respondents’ age, ISCED-based education level (low/intermediate/high), and whether they had a permanent employment contract (*What type of employment relationship do you currently have?* permanent contract). Coding for the variables included in the analyses can be found in Table 1. Item nonresponse was low (3 per cent) and did not exceed 11 per cent for any single variable included in the analysis. Missing data on the independent variables were dealt with by multiple stochastic regression imputation (Enders, 2010).

Imagine that you are looking for (new) paid employment. During your search you encounter several jobs and you are reading the descriptions. For each of these jobs you may assume that it fits your education and work experience, that it pays an appropriate salary, that the work is enjoyable and that you will have nice colleagues.

The characteristics of each job are shown below. Could you indicate how attractive you find this job for yourself? Please remember: you do not need to take your actual job or current work situation into account.

This job has the following characteristics:	
• Contract type	temporary for 3 years
• Supplementary pension	is accumulated
• Assigned tasks	fixed
• Training opportunities	limited
• Influence on working hours	large
• Possibilities to determine how work is executed	many
• Opportunity to work from home	yes

How attractive do you find this job for yourself?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<u>Highly unattractive</u>					<u>Neutral</u>				<u>Highly attractive</u>	

Figure 1 Example of a vignette

Analytic strategy

In a factorial survey, the units of analysis are the vignettes. When participants are asked to rate multiple vignettes, the gathered data have a hierarchical structure by design. The vignettes (level 1) are nested within study participants (level 2) (Auspurg and Hinz, 2015). Two-level linear mixed-effects models were estimated to account for the variance in both levels of the data. Random slopes for contract type were included at the respondent level (Heisig and Schaeffer, 2019). To allow for the observation of gender differences, we estimated separate models for men and women. To test whether observed differences between men and women are statistically significant, we analysed the full sample and ran models in which all of the independent

variables were interacted with respondents' gender. The dependent variable-job rating-has been standardized to allow for an interpretation of the estimates for the independent dummy variables in terms of Cohen's *d* effect sizes. Cohen (2013) suggested that $d \leq 0.2$ be considered a 'small' effect size, 0.5 represents a 'medium' effect size, and ≥ 0.8 a 'large' effect size. To answer our first research question, job rating was regressed on indicators for the different contract types while controlling for all other vignette characteristics as well as respondents' age, age-squared, education level, and the indicator for paid work. To study our second research question, we extended this model by including cross-level interactions between the indicators for the different flexible contract types and key

respondent characteristics, specifically residential status, relationship status, and parental status (correlation matrix in [Supplementary Table A1](#)).

Results

Table 2 presents coefficient estimates from a set of two-level mixed-effects models based on separate samples of men and women. Model I is the base model and shows the main effect of different contract types on job rating. Models II–IV allow for a test of the events hypotheses by interpreting the interactions between the indicators for the contract types and respondents' residential status (Model II), respondents' relationship status (Model III), and respondents' parental status (Model IV). Model V includes the interactions between the indicators for the contract types and the three life events simultaneously to check to what degree the estimates from Models II to IV are independent of one another. Statistically significant differences in the size of the effects between men and women are indicated as bold pairs.

Main effect of contract type

In line with the security hypothesis, young adults' job ratings clearly differed based on the type of contract that was offered. The results from Model I show that hypothetical jobs based on either a temporary contract for 3 years, a temporary contract for 1 year, an agency contract, or an on-call contract were all rated significantly less attractive than when a job was offered on a permanent contract. Moreover, the lower the level of job security implied by the employment contract, the stronger the negative effect on job rating. The offer of a temporary contract for 3 years has, what can be considered a small negative effect on how attractive a job appears to young adults (Cohen's *d*: Men = -0.39 , $P < 0.001$; Women = -0.34 , $P < 0.001$), whereas the offer of a temporary contract for 1 year has a medium size negative effect (Cohen's *d*: Men = -0.68 , $P < 0.001$; Women = -0.63 , $P < 0.001$). Both the offer of a job on an agency contract (Cohen's *d*: Men = -1.00 , $P < 0.001$; Women = -0.92 , $P < 0.001$) as well as a job on an on-call contract (Cohen's *d*: Men = -1.23 , $P < 0.001$; Women = -1.08 , $P < 0.001$) have a large negative effect on job rating. These findings provide support for the hypothesis that young adults prefer job security and suggest that they dislike employment conditions that create uncertainty.

For both men and women, the results from Model I also show a small negative association between paid work and job rating (Cohen's *d*: Men = -0.22 , $P < 0.001$; Women = -0.11 , $P = 0.033$). This suggests that young adults who are mainly involved in paid

work, i.e. not a student anymore, were slightly more critical in their overall evaluation of jobs. No significant associations were found between respondents' age (including age-squared) or education level and job rating.

Job preferences and markers of adulthood

The results for the interaction effects in Model II support events hypothesis 1: that young people's preference for job security is stronger for those who have left the parental home. Although young people who lived with their parents (reference category) also showed a preference for a permanent contract, jobs based on an agency contract (Cohen's *d*: Men = -0.29 , $P < 0.001$; Women = -0.15 , $P = 0.036$) or an on-call contract (Cohen's *d*: Men = -0.43 , $P < 0.001$; Women = -0.23 , $P = 0.002$) were rated even less attractive by young people who lived independently. The size of these effects ranges from small to medium.

The results of Model III partly support events hypothesis 2 stating that young people's preference for job security is stronger for those who have entered a romantic union. For men, Model III shows that all of the interactions between the different flexible contract types and respondents' relationship status are statistically significant. This means that jobs based on a temporary contract for 3 years, a temporary contract for 1 year, an agency contract or an on-call contract were rated even less attractive by men who had a romantic partner when compared with men who considered themselves single. These interaction effects are most pronounced for jobs offered on an agency contract (Cohen's *d*: Men = -0.39 , $P < 0.001$) or an on-call contract (Cohen's *d*: Men = -0.45 , $P < 0.001$). For women, we do not find support for a stronger preference for job security when they are in a romantic relationship.

The results of Model IV provide support for events hypothesis 3: that young people's preference for job security is stronger for those who have entered parenthood. To men with children the offer of a job based on a temporary contract for 1 year (Cohen's *d*: Men = -0.36 , $P = 0.007$) or an on-call contract (Cohen's *d*: Men = -0.40 , $P = 0.006$) appeared less attractive than to men who did not have children. To women with children the offer of an agency contract appeared less attractive than to women without children (Cohen's *d*: Women = -0.22 , $P = 0.013$). The effects can be considered small to medium sized.

The results from Models III and IV provide partial support for the gendered events hypothesis that preferences for job security of young adults who have entered into a romantic partnership or entered parenthood are stronger for men when compared with women. The observed differences between men and women in the interaction effect of contract type and relationship

Table 2 Effect of contract type and its interaction with key life events on job rating for men and women—estimates from two-level mixed-effects models

	Job rating										
	Model I		Model II		Model III		Model IV		Model V		
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	
Coef (SE)	Coef (SE)	Coef (SE)	Coef (SE)	Coef (SE)	Coef (SE)	Coef (SE)	Coef (SE)	Coef (SE)	Coef (SE)	Coef (SE)	
Contract type <i>Ref = permanent (tenured)</i>											
Temp. 3 years	-0.39*** (0.04)	-0.34*** (0.03)	-0.29*** (0.06)	-0.31*** (0.05)	-0.24*** (0.06)	-0.31*** (0.05)	-0.37*** (0.04)	-0.33*** (0.04)	-0.22** (0.07)	-0.30*** (0.06)	
Temp. 1 year	-0.68*** (0.04)	-0.63*** (0.03)	-0.58*** (0.07)	-0.57*** (0.05)	-0.53*** (0.06)	-0.57*** (0.05)	-0.64*** (0.04)	-0.61*** (0.04)	-0.52*** (0.07)	-0.54*** (0.06)	
Agency contract	-1.00*** (0.05)	-0.92*** (0.03)	-0.82*** (0.07)	-0.82*** (0.06)	-0.77*** (0.07)	-0.84*** (0.06)	-0.98*** (0.05)	-0.88*** (0.04)	-0.72*** (0.08)	-0.80*** (0.06)	
On-call	-1.23*** (0.05)	-1.08*** (0.04)	-0.96*** (0.08)	-0.93*** (0.06)	-0.98*** (0.07)	-1.05*** (0.06)	-1.19*** (0.05)	-1.05*** (0.04)	-0.87*** (0.08)	-0.96*** (0.07)	
Contract × Indep. residence <i>Ref = permanent × lives with parents</i>											
Temp. 3 years × lives independently			-0.17* (0.08)	-0.06 (0.07)					-0.05 (0.09)	-0.03 (0.07)	
Temp. 1 year × lives independently			-0.14* (0.08)	-0.10 (0.07)					-0.01 (0.10)	-0.06 (0.08)	
Agency × lives independently			-0.28** (0.09)	-0.15* (0.07)					-0.14 (0.11)	-0.09 (0.08)	
On-call × lives independently			-0.43*** (0.10)	-0.23** (0.07)					-0.27* (0.11)	-0.24* (0.08)	
Contract × Relationship <i>Ref = permanent × no partner or spouse</i>											
Temp. 3 years × has partner or spouse					-0.27** (0.08)				-0.24** (0.09)	-0.02 (0.07)	
Temp. 1 year × has partner or spouse					-0.25** (0.08)				-0.20* (0.10)	-0.06 (0.07)	
Agency × has partner or spouse					-0.39*** (0.09)				-0.34** (0.10)	-0.04 (0.08)	
On-call × has partner or spouse					-0.45*** (0.09)				-0.30** (0.12)	0.07 (0.08)	
Contract × Parent <i>Ref = permanent × no children</i>											
Temp. 3 years × has child(ren)							-0.23* (0.12)	-0.08 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.13)	-0.06 (0.09)	
Temp. 1 year × has child(ren)							-0.36** (0.13)	-0.09 (0.09)	-0.27* (0.14)	-0.04 (0.09)	
Agency × has child(ren)							-0.17 (0.14)	-0.22* (0.09)	0.05 (0.15)	-0.17* (0.10)	
On-call × has child(ren)							-0.40** (0.15)	-0.12 (0.10)	-0.15 (0.15)	-0.06 (0.10)	
Indep. residence (0/1)			0.20* (0.10)	-0.03 (0.07)					0.15 (0.10)	0.01 (0.07)	
Relationship (0/1)					-0.10 (0.08)				0.06 (0.08)	0.05 (0.06)	
Parent (0/1)							-0.00 (0.12)	-0.02 (0.08)	-0.08 (0.12)	-0.05 (0.08)	

Table 2. Continued

	Job rating									
Paid work (0/1)	-0.22** (0.07)	-0.11* (0.05)	-0.22** (0.07)	-0.11* (0.05)	-0.20** (0.07)	-0.12* (0.05)	-0.21** (0.07)	-0.12* (0.05)	-0.20** (0.09)	-0.12* (0.05)
Constant	0.66*** (0.10)	0.62*** (0.08)	0.56*** (0.10)	0.56*** (0.08)	0.54*** (0.10)	0.59*** (0.08)	0.63*** (0.10)	0.61*** (0.05)	0.52*** (0.10)	0.55*** (0.08)
Number of vignettes	3,192	5,008	3,192	5,008	3,192	5,008	3,192	5,008	3,192	5,008
Number of respondents	399	626	399	626	399	626	399	626	399	626
Wald χ^2 (df)	1,532.2 (15)	2,263.5 (15)	1,573.7 (20)	2,283.2 (20)	1,593.6 (20)	2,248.9 (20)	1,555.0 (20)	2,275.9 (20)	1,621.5 (30)	2,297.0 (30)
SD u_i (individuals)	0.50	0.47	0.50	0.47	0.50	0.47	0.50	0.47	0.49	0.47
SD e_j (residual)	0.61	0.62	0.61	0.62	0.61	0.62	0.61	0.62	0.61	0.62
Intraclass corr. ρ	0.40	0.37	0.40	0.37	0.40	0.37	0.39	0.37	0.39	0.37

Notes: In Models I–V, all the other vignette dimensions (level 1) as well as age, age-squared, and education level (level 2) were included as controls; coefficients for men and women in bold are significantly different from each other at $\alpha = 0.05$, pairs in italics only at $\alpha = 0.1$.

*** $P < 0.0001$, ** $P < 0.01$, * $P < 0.05$, $P < 0.1$.

status (Model III) are statistically significant for most types of flexible contracts. However, somewhat surprisingly given the above-mentioned finding, the observed differences between men and women in the interaction effect of contract type and parent status (Model IV) are not or only borderline significant. This finding could be influenced by the fact that the number of men with children in the sample is relatively small, meaning subtle subgroup differences are less likely to be statistically significant (Supplementary Tables A6 and A7).

In line with the theoretical idea of the transition to adulthood consisting of an accumulation of life events, the results of Model V show that the observed relationships based on Models II–IV are not fully independent. For instance, the size of the coefficients for the interactions between temporary contracts and independent residence among men is reduced considerably when both partner and parent status are also taken into account. However, on-call contracts were rated even less attractive by young people who lived independently regardless of whether they had a partner or children. The estimates from Model V also clearly show a stronger preference for job security among men with a partner. To illustrate this interaction effect, Figure 2 presents predicted values for job rating per contract type for men and women with and without a partner. Predictions are unstandardized and can be interpreted based on the 0–10 scale used in the experiment. Zooming in on the predictions for men, Figure 2 shows that all men gave jobs based on an agency or on-call contract a bad rating, but for men with a partner that rating (agency contract job-4.7; on-call contract job-4.1) is even lower than for men without a partner (agency contract job-5.3; on-call contract job-4.7). Overall, the figure also illustrates the main effect of contract type by showing that for both men and women with and without a partner, ratings for jobs based on different types of flexible contracts are consistently lower than for a job on a permanent contract.

Sensitivity analysis

Although participants had been instructed not to take their actual job or current work situation into account, we still performed a sensitivity analysis based on whether or not young adults, in reality, had a permanent contract (Supplementary Tables A4 and A5).

Subgroup analyses of respondents with a permanent employment contract (Men: $n = 151$; Women: $n = 223$) show that the main negative effects of offering a type of flexible employment contract on job rating are substantially stronger as compared to the results for the full sample. The interactions between different flexible contract types and residential status, relationship status, and parental status are, for the most part, no

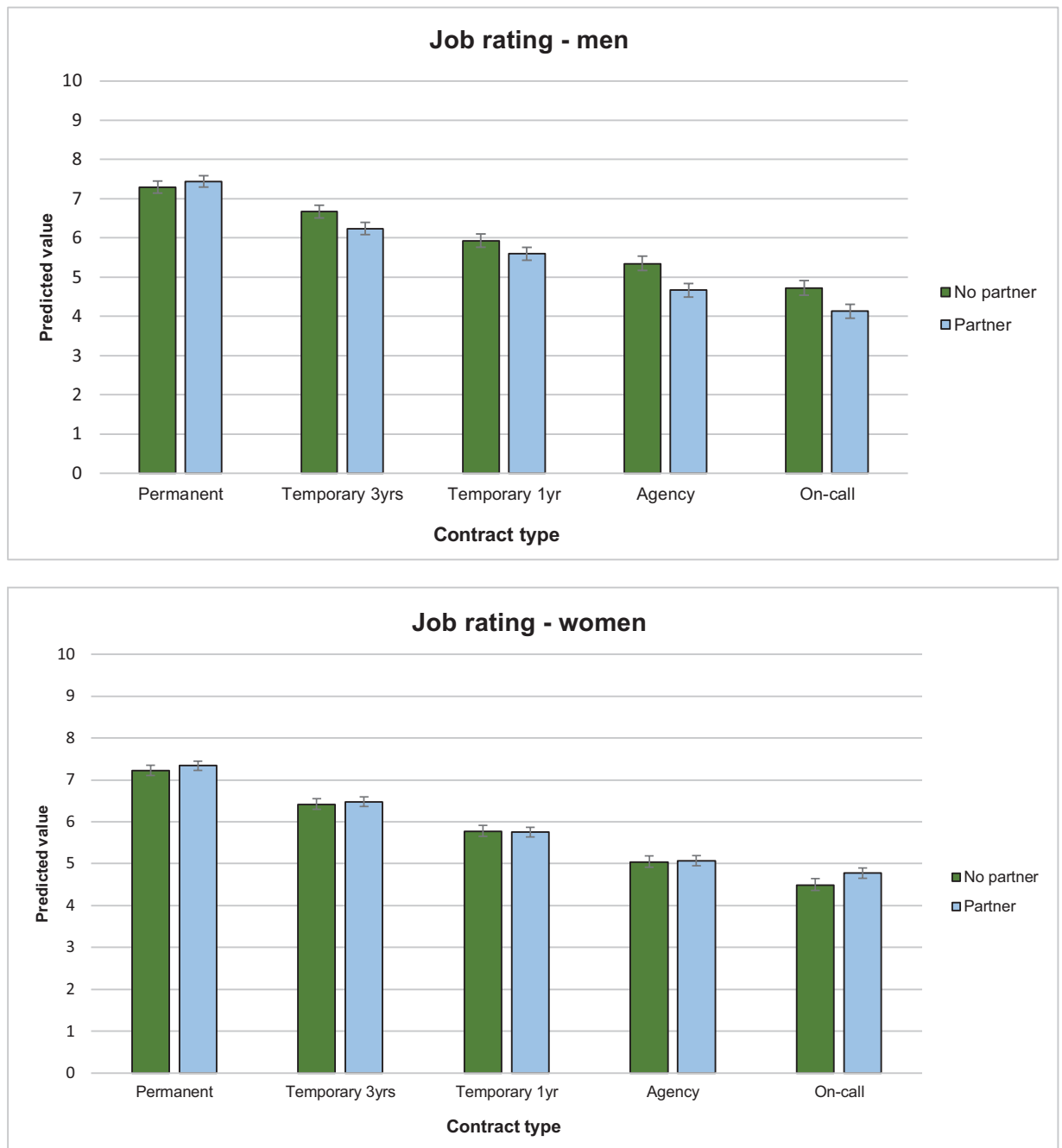


Figure 2 Predicted values for job rating per contract type by relationship status—for men and women

Notes: These illustrations are based on estimates for Model V in Table 2 using the unstandardized values for job rating. To calculate the predicted values, the other vignette characteristics were fixed as follows: Supplementary pension [0], Training opportunities [0], Flexibility of working hours [1], Task flexibility [1], Opportunity to work from home [1], Autonomy [1]

longer significant. Subgroup analyses of respondents without a permanent employment contract (Men: $n = 254$; Women: $n = 407$) do provide support for the hypothesis that preferences for job security differ

between young people in different phases of adulthood and that these preferences are stronger for men than for women. These findings suggest that respondents in permanent employment display such a strong overall

distaste for insecure contracts that additional markers of adulthood no longer have an impact on their job preferences.

Discussion and conclusion

The presented empirical study shows that the offered type of employment contract can have a strong impact on young adults' rating of the attractiveness of a job. For both men and women, we find that the lower the degree of security provided by an offered employment contract, the lower young adults' job rating. Especially the offer of a contract via an employment agency or an on-call contract has a large negative influence. The empirical evidence also supports the notion that young people's preference for secure employment becomes stronger as they transition into adulthood. We find that young people's preference for job security is stronger for those who have passed the first marker of adulthood and left the parental home. We also find support for the idea that young people's preference for job security is stronger for those who have entered a romantic union. However, in this case, the mechanism only applies to men. Regarding the hallmark of adulthood, namely parenthood, we find indications that young people's preference for job security is stronger if they have children.

For research on the individual-level outcomes of employment instability, this study shows that, although both young men and young women deem insecurity of employment undesirable, it is important to distinguish clearly between different types of flexible employment contracts. Whereas young adults might consider a temporary contract that lasts multiple years as being less appealing than a permanent contract, work on an on-call contract can be experienced as highly problematic. This difference in the subjective evaluation of contract types is likely to stem from differences in terms of the level of employment and income security that these types can provide (Mattijssen and Pavlopoulos, 2019). In work-motivation literature, job security is described as a concrete feature of the work environment that affects an individual's welfare (Campbell and Pritchard, 1976). Together with other aspects such as pay, job security is understood as a lower-order individual concern. Higher-order concerns are about psychological needs such as achievement or affiliation. It is generally assumed that an individual's lower-order concerns need to be met before higher-order concerns can be attended to (Başlevent and Kirmanoğlu, 2013). Besides this, young adults' might display a distaste for on-call work because they associate it with lower social status. Employment on an agency or on-call contract, especially at older ages, might be judged a sign of individual inadequacy, as a lack of the

ability to acquire a 'good' job on a permanent contract (Kalleberg *et al.*, 2000).

Our findings suggest that work experience could make young adults more critical in their overall judgement of a job. However, our empirical work also indicates that young people's preferences in the work domain are related to and likely influenced by developments in other life domains, such as their family life. Findings show differences in preferences between men and women. Men with a romantic partner considered a lack of employment security more problematic than those who were single, which suggests that men, when compared with women with a partner, harbour an additional distaste for insecure employment offers if they have entered a romantic partnership. This distaste signals the persistence of a socialized, gendered commitment to taking on the provider role among young men. Although our study does not identify causal relationships, these findings align with research on the male marriage wage premium: married men on average earning higher wages than otherwise similar unmarried men (McDonald, 2020). Further research on preferences of younger workers could gain more nuance if it were to distinguish between groups of younger workers based on their degree of adult responsibilities.

When interpreting the findings of this study, some limitations should be kept in mind. First, respondents' occupation, family background, and socialization experiences may also have an influence on their individual job preferences. Although we included a number of key sociodemographic respondent characteristics in our analyses, information on these particular aspects was not available and could therefore not be taken into consideration. Future research could look at how preferences for secure employment differ between young workers in different branches of industry. Second, we cannot fully rule out potential anticipation effects with regard to the three life events. Especially with regard to the transition to parenthood, there might have been respondents without children who were planning to start a family soon. Their preference for secure employment would be more similar to people with children and thus stronger than we hypothesized. The current findings would then be an underestimation of actual group differences. We can neither rule out potential self-selection in the three life events. Some of the respondents who had already experienced a life event could on average be better able to deal with insecurity than those who did not. Their preference for secure employment would then be weaker than we hypothesized. Each mechanism could make the test for group differences less precise, but simultaneously they would cancel each other out. Since this study's findings are based on cross-sectional data, we cannot observe these possible mechanisms for they require a longitudinal

research design. Third, the study was conducted in the Netherlands, a country with stringent employment protection for permanent employees and a relatively low youth unemployment rate (Statistics Netherlands, 2022). These contextual circumstances could make our findings less applicable to European countries where young adults face markedly different labour market conditions, such as Spain or Italy (Barbieri and Scherer, 2009). When job opportunities for younger workers are low, their focus might initially be more on escaping unemployment, than on acquiring a high degree of job security.

Various European countries have seen a trend towards increasingly flexible labour markets, in which the use of several types of flexible employment contracts has become standard practice. These contracts are especially prevalent among younger workers. The results presented in this article thus suggest that young people's job preferences are often not met. Contrary to what has occasionally been prophesized in the grey literature (PWC, 2013), our empirical study shows that young people do value job security. Moreover, people aged 18–35 years old are an extremely heterogeneous group and the transition to adulthood increases their preference for secure employment. The fact that younger workers predominantly work in non-standard employment is more likely to be the result of limited opportunities on the demand side of the labour market than the result of an active choice by younger workers themselves.

Notes

1. The LISS panel is based on a true probability sample of households drawn from the population register by Statistics Netherlands. Households that could not otherwise participate are provided with a computer and Internet connection and individuals are paid for each completed questionnaire. Longitudinal surveys are fielded in the panel every year designed to follow changes in the life course and living conditions of the panel members (Scherpenzeel and Das, 2010).
2. Before data collection, the comprehensibility of the study design was piloted among six individuals (aged 18–35).
3. Total number of possible vignettes for the study: $5 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 = 320$.
4. In the LISS panel, information on household composition is measured at the household level and not at the respondent level. We therefore use information on the position of the respondent within the household to distinguish respondents who had started their own household from (adult) children living at home with their parents. We could not construct a separate indicator for 'cohabitation with partner' because the data do not allow for a perfect distinction between respondents who live independently as singles or in a different household than their partner from those who live independently in the same household as their partner.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are available at *ESR* online.

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Author contributions

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