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Working through (mis)recognition: Understanding vulnerability as ambivalence in precarious worker subjectivity

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Abstract

Most workers around the world are part of the precariat, characterized by non-permanent, informal, short-term, low-pay, low-skill, and insecure jobs. While there have been many socio-economic critiques of the negative impacts of precarity on workers, the literature has increasingly asked how precarious workers actually live their lives and how their subjectivities are produced on a daily basis. We contribute to this literature by providing a psychosocial account of the ambivalent experiences of precarious workers. We contend that the interplay of recognition and misrecognition plays a crucial role, as the vulnerable, working subject becomes entangled in a complex web of recognizability. We present insights from 104 in-depth interviews, providing a Lacanian analysis of how precarious workers develop unconscious attachments to neoliberal values that are central to the logic of precarity. Understanding this ambivalence helps us develop a more nuanced view of an ethics of precarious workers' vulnerability.

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Introduction

Precarious work is not a fringe phenomenon. It is an endemic and growing problem in the global workforce (ILO, 2022). While many jobs in the Global South have never been permanent, high-skill, secure nor well-paid (Munck et al., 2020), there has been an intensifying process of precarization since at least the 1980s when neoliberal policies, aimed at labor market flexibilization (Putnam et al., 2014), were first introduced in the Global North, particularly the UK and the US (Kalleberg, 2011). This has led to the emergence of a segmented, two-tier labor market (Holst, 2014) with well-paid, career positions in the primary segment, and mostly insecure, temporary, and short-term jobs in the secondary one (Gebel, 2010). Austerity measures, following the financial crisis of 2007–2010, further weakened labor markets, while the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the inequalities of this two-tier system with millions of precarious workers losing their jobs (Barua, 2021).

There have been many critical accounts of these developments, scrutinizing the forms and processes of control of precarious workers, leading to reduced protection from employment mistreatment, exposure to health and safety risks and exploitation of vulnerable workers (Armano and Murgia, 2017; Standing, 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). While these socio-economic analyses have been crucial in understanding the negative impacts of precarity on workers, the literature has increasingly explored the subjective enactments of precarious workers (Carr and Kelan, 2023; Lewis et al., 2015; Millar, 2017; Murgia and Pulignano, 2021; Patulny et al., 2020). Specifically, authors ask how precarious work is actually lived by vulnerable workers on a daily basis (Carr and Kelan, 2023; Peticca-Harris et al., 2020). This article is located precisely at the juncture of understanding the dynamics of precarity as a socio-economic process and the ontological experience of precarity.

While extant literature has developed insights into the complex subjectivity-making processes of precarious workers as they attempt to navigate the multifaceted and even chaotic dynamics of everyday precarity (Bove et al., 2017; Moisander et al., 2018), we contend that authors have not sufficiently understood the ambivalence that is at the heart of precarious workers' daily experience. Here, the vicissitudes of recognition and misrecognition play a crucial role, as the vulnerable, working subject becomes entangled in a complex web of recognizability that will see them being both excluded from and included in various life spheres (Fleischmann et al., 2022; Fotaki, 2022).

Much of the work and human relations literature (Cutcher et al., 2022; Tomkins and Eatough, 2014; Tyler, 2019; Tyler and Vachhani, 2021) has analyzed processes of recognition through Butler's (2006, 2009) analytical lens. For Butler, recognition is a basic, ontological process of subjectivity-making, as the precarious worker learns how to identify with the societal norms and rules that impose precarity (Fotaki, 2022; Motakef, 2019). Butler's important ethics come to the fore through the call to recognize our own vulnerability and that of the other. That is, a Butlerian critique of precarity as ontology calls for a re-recognition effort that reduces the distance between the I and the other. Applied to the

precarious work domain, this might involve, for example, the ethical act of the (informal) employer of a cleaner recognizing their own vulnerability and dependence on that precarious worker. We argue, however, that such Butlerian interpretations of recognition are conceived in overly dichotomic terms, as they rely on a crude distinction between the inner world of the subject and the outer world of the other. To extend and enrich a Butlerian reading, we turn to Lacan's (1998, 2002) psychoanalytic theory, which, we contend, can help us understand the ambivalence at the heart of precarious workers' experiences as they develop unconscious attachments to the neoliberal values of precarity.

From a Lacanian perspective, the psychosocial boundaries of the vulnerable subject are affirmed as radically ambiguous, blurring the distinction between psychic interiority and social exteriority. This is because a recognition effort always involves – according to Lacan (1998, 2002) – also a misrecognition. The key difference between Butler and Lacan is the conception of discourse and hence recognizability. For Butler (2006, 2009), following Foucault (1981), discourse is a socio-cultural domain that allows norms and practices to be shared and instituted. For Lacan (1998, 2002), however, that shared social medium is constantly interrupted by the subject's lived experience as well as their inner drives, anxieties, and passions. This is why, for Lacan, any recognition effort is partial and ultimately proves to be a misrecognition of the subject's concrete dependencies. Hence, in this article we ask: how can we understand the ambivalent, daily experiences of precarious workers, given that any efforts to be recognized – and hence to construct their subjectivity – will always be interrupted by misrecognitions? And, relatedly, how can this understanding of the interplay of recognition and misrecognition help us develop a more nuanced view of an ethics of precarious workers' vulnerability?

To answer these research questions, we analyze 104 in-depth interviews with three groups of nominally precarious workers based in the UK. Our findings show precarious workers' ambivalent, everyday experiences marked by insecurity, uncertainty, and instability (Motakef, 2019). Using the full spectrum of creativity, they constantly try to appropriate and re-invent the everyday reality of precarity, while developing unconscious attachments to the neoliberal values of freedom and autonomy (Armano and Murgia, 2017; Moisander et al., 2018) as well as resolve (Webb, 2007), which has also been named resilience (Webster and Rivers, 2019). These values are central to the logic of precarity, ultimately not allowing, however, subjects to constitute a full agency over their lives.

We now proceed as follows. First, we provide a critical overview of the precarious work literature, identifying its main strands and putting forward our theoretical framework based on readings of Butler and Lacan. We then outline our methods and present our findings, foregrounding key dimensions of precarious work subjectivities in our sample. We then discuss our findings, putting forward a Lacanian theory of precarious work subjectivity before concluding the article.

Subjectivity of precarious workers: A review of the literature

The extensive scholarship on precariousness in and around work offers a rich yet often puzzling picture for those who attempt to understand the current and future fate of the laboring subject. As Campbell and Price (2016) contend, the concept of precariousness

can be seen as spanning at least five levels of social life (see also Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013; Kalleberg, 2011). First, it encompasses precariousness in employment, referring to objective job characteristics that involve insecurity (e.g., Vallas and Prener, 2012). Second, it encompasses precarious work, understood as waged work, often in non-standard jobs, exhibiting dimensions of precariousness. Third, it encompasses precarious workers, alluding to 'persons not just engaged in precarious work but also enduring the necessary consequences of precariousness' (Campbell and Price, 2016: 315). Fourth, it encompasses the precariat, which can be identified as a class-in-the-making that is emerging from the ranks of precarious workers (Standing, 2011: 7). Fifth, it encompasses precarity, referring to a 'generalized set of conditions and an associated sense of insecurity, experienced by precarious workers, but extending to other domains of social life such as housing, welfare provision and personal relationships' (Campbell and Price, 2016: 316).

Distinguishing between these levels does not obscure the three central assumptions that have driven the study of precariousness in and around work thus far: first, that there is an undeniable tendency to make work more uncertain, unstable and insecure; second, that employed or self-employed actors – and not businesses or the government – are made to bear the risks of work; and, third, that these actors are to receive limited social benefits and statutory protections, or none at all (Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018; see also Hewison, 2016; Vosko, 2011). While these assumptions are mainly based on socio-economic, even structural, conditions of contemporary capitalism, they also provide a glimpse of precarity as a set of subjective and gendered constructions of precarious workers (Carr and Kelan, 2023; Lewis et al., 2015; Millar, 2017; Murgia and Pulignano, 2021; Patulny et al., 2020). In this article, analytical efforts are directed precisely at this in-between ground, the juncture between the third and fifth levels of precariousness as defined by Campbell and Price (2016).

Our attention is directed, particularly, to the way in which the subjectivities of those who take part in precarized labor become wholly redefined under the terms of the existential necessities that a vulnerable form of living imposes (Bove et al., 2017; Butler, 2006, 2009; Gago, 2017; Lorey, 2015), not just in terms of their rationalities and self-narratives (Moisander et al., 2018) but also, more deeply, in terms of the precarized subjects' unconscious attachments, affective embodiments, and creative practices (Hoedemaekers, 2018). As the works of Butler and Stoyanova Russell (2018) as well as Carr and Kelan (2023) have recently shown, it is worth considering the norms and practices that configure precarity, appreciating how they become twisted and re-appropriated, especially in the realms of emotional selfhood and domestic family life (Motakef, 2019; Stewart, 2012). This entails paying attention to what Motakef (2019) has called 'precarity of life arrangement'. This alludes to the ambivalent nature of the everyday experience of precariousness, shaping the precarious, working subject to function and recognize themselves within life arrangements marked by insecurity, uncertainty, and instability, yet never fully determining their agency (Motakef, 2019; see also Alberti et al., 2018; Barnes and Weller, 2020; Butler, 2006, 2009; Lorey, 2015).

The sociology of work literature has taken these insights into various research directions. First, authors have aimed at understanding the complex subjectivity-making processes of precarious workers as they attempt to navigate complex gender, class, and

ethnic dynamics (Lawton et al., 2015; Misra, 2021; Peticca-Harris et al., 2020; see also Holvino, 2010). This research highlights that the shared experience of precarious work is grounded, multifaceted, and even chaotic, rather than uniform and universal (Bove at al., 2017; Della Porta et al., 2015). Another insight is that precarity ought to be conceived as multidimensional, incorporating interweaving psychosocial and geographic processes, rather than a purely socio-economic dynamic (see Lorey, 2015). Here, researchers have focused on the trajectories of black and immigrant female workers (Crenshaw, 2017), the fragile Eastern European workforce in the UK (Anderson, 2010; Alberti et al., 2018), the lack of employment alternatives for low-pensioned female workers (Lain et al., 2019), and the racial and gender dynamics that underlie COVID-19-triggered labor insecurity (Cubrich et al., 2022; Debus et al., 2021), to name only a few topics. These studies see the precarized subject as constantly attempting to navigate an entanglement of embodied identities, rationalities, and rules – all for the procurement of their own livelihood (Motakef, 2019). This perspective is most useful because it illuminates the fact that inequalities in capitalist economies emerge not only as a result of structural, labor market duality (i.e., good/secure vs bad/insecure employment), but also through the destabilizing influences of cosmopolitanism, hybridity, multiculturalism, and globalization (Walby, 2012).

Second, focus has been placed on how policymakers and especially precarized subjects themselves have come to appreciate uncertainty and insecurity as conditions for (and outcomes of) precarious work. According to Bove et al. (2017), researchers need to explain the insidious quality of precarity; that is, the way in which it takes hold of the subject's construction of their interpersonal space, imbricating with their realization of a sense of freedom, autonomy, and resolve, both at discursive and practical levels (Ferreri and Dawson, 2018; Harris and Nowicki, 2018; Moisander et al., 2018; Webster and Rivers, 2019). This implies that precarity should be understood as a process in which citizens are forced to turn into 'entrepreneurs of their own human capital', ultimately giving rise to 'forms of subjectivation and construction of the self that rely on fragmentation, individuation and the logic of the enterprise' (Bove et al., 2017: 4). Precarity must therefore be conceptualized through a subjective lens. That is, precarity is to be not only understood as a process (i.e. 'precarization') that can reproduce itself through the mediation of a psychological and even biographical construal by the precarized subject (Alberti et al., 2018; Mrozowicki and Trappmann, 2021). It is also to be conceived as a way of securing and grounding subjectivity through concrete interactions with actors, spaces, and technologies. In other words, precarity is to be understood as self-precarization, a means to gain a subjective position from which to make-do, often passionately, with exclusionary boundaries and meager opportunities and resources (Carbajo and Santamaría, 2019; Carr and Kelan, 2023; Ferreri and Dawson, 2018; Morini et al., 2014; Serrano and Martín, 2017).

From this standpoint, precarity is approached from below, not as negativity, as an incomplete, unrealized reality, but as positivity, as a way of living that is actively and creatively produced (Gago, 2017). It is seen as the only way to get through the everyday, to keep life moving between inhabitable borders, for both the worker and their support network (Lorey, 2015; Ní Mhurchú, 2021). Hence, precarized subjects, which seem to have been thoroughly expelled from the realm of legitimate socio-economic exchanges

(Sassen, 2014), find themselves precisely when the ordeals and fragility of work become the measure with which they capture and value their own experience (Fotaki, 2022). When fully involved in the precarity of life arrangements (Motakef, 2019), the subject becomes entangled in a complex dynamic of recognitions: they can be excluded and delegitimized by the sphere of work, yet, at the same time, they can be included and legitimized by the bonds of love and solidarity they cannot help but establish with those in the same existential predicament (Fleischmann et al., 2022; Fotaki, 2022; Gago, 2017). In short, what these studies have shown is that precarious work is the product of a particular, and indeed epochal, mode of defining and embodying subjectivity (Bove et al., 2017).

Such conceptualizations signal a more fundamental debate about precariousness as an ontological problem of recognition and misrecognition, which, we believe, is underrepresented in the literature. In the next section, we explore this, with the help of Butler and Lacan.

The ontological turn: From recognition to misrecognition

The above review has made clear that precarious work is not only to do with the regimes that generate socio-economic inequality and insecure employment, but also the insecurity that is experienced and endured by workers on an everyday basis. For Butler (2006, 2009), this notion can be understood, first and foremost, as inextricably linked to the fact that we, as humans, live social lives, 'the fact that one's own life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies . . . a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all' (Butler, 2009: 14). Such existential condition of having to construct one's own self in relation to others links the experience of the precarized subject to the psychosocial problem of recognition – as has been discussed by a number of work and human relations authors (Cutcher et al., 2019, 2022; Ekman, 2013; Hancock, 2016; Roberts, 2005; Tomkins and Eatough, 2014; Tyler and Vachhani, 2021).

For Butler (2006, 2009), recognition is not just conceived as the process through which an individual learns to see, accept, and mobilize oneself productively as precarious under the gaze of the other. It is also, more fundamentally, conceived as the production of subjectivity itself, as Tyler and Vachhani (2021) make clear in their study of inclusion practices at Primark, and as Cutcher et al. (2022) show in their study of older call center workers. Recognition, then, points to the process in which the precarious subject, in their quest to sustain themselves, is set to anticipate, decode, and identify with the societal norms and rules that impose precarity (Carr and Kelan, 2023; Hoedemaekers, 2018; Moisander et al., 2018). In this way, Butler's theory of recognition adopts a firmly ontological standpoint: 'subjects are not affirmed positively in what they already are, but rather they are produced as such by powerful norms of recognizability' (Motakef, 2019: 162).

In a Butlerian critique of precarity, which has 'ontological effects' (Cutcher et al., 2022: 976), the subject is assumed as ultimately finding themselves in 'recognizing interconnectedness vis-à-vis the (unknown) but embodied other' (Fotaki, 2022: 317). In this way, it is radically open, regardless of how precarious their existence might be. As Fotaki (2022: 318) proposes, 'vulnerability as a universally shared condition that affects us can

provide a basis for recognizing all human beings and all lives as equivalent, despite their difference'. It is this notion of the subject being able to become dignified in a re-recognition effort through reducing their distance to the other that allows Butler and Fotaki to bridge the gap of in-security that precarity instates. The other resembles us but is exterior (Levinas in Fotaki, 2022: 318), and the agonistic solidarity that is at the center of Butlerian approaches to precariousness relies precisely on the gesture of recognizing one's own dependence on the other 'without presupposing knowability or even reciprocity' (Fotaki, 2022: 317).

Nevertheless, we contend that such ontological understandings of precarious subjectivity are conceived in overly dichotomic terms. The subject's capacity to re-recognize themselves is said to rely on a primary twofold recognition: of the vulnerability of others as well as that of their own. The bodily affects that propel this recognition (e.g. fear, empathy, compassion) are deemed as anchoring the subject strictly from within, while the embodiments of others, as Fotaki (2022) emphasizes, are deemed external and foreign. This clear separation between interiority and exteriority is the cornerstone of the project to promote an ethics, and thus a politics, of precarity as recognition. A recognition ethic, then, is said to come about through a process of the 'mutual recognition of our intercorporeal relationality and ontological vulnerability' (Tyler, 2019: 62). This is a laudable ethic that must be supported, we believe, in a context of increasing precarization where suffering is becoming widespread. Our concern, however, is that it relies on a duality between interiority and exteriority that inadequately characterizes the subjectivity of precarious workers. To extend and enrich a Butlerian reading, we believe that Lacan's psychoanalytic theory can help us conceive the precarious worker-subject as a product of the affective enactment and symbolic exchange between self and others.

The key difference between Butlerian and Lacanian scholarship is related to their conception of what discourse is, and how it works. For Butler (2006, 2009), following Foucault (1981), discourse is a shared socio-cultural domain that allows norms and practices to be recorded, reproduced, and instituted (see also Cutcher et al., 2022). For Lacan (1998, 2002), however, discourse is a medium that infuses the universal quality of the normative with the singular quality of the subject's lived experience, particularly their gestures of appropriation and negotiation with significant others, such as parents, siblings, and other figures of care. This is why, for Lacan, any recognition of others in the imaginary is partial and ultimately proves to be a misrecognition of the subject's concrete dependencies (Epstein, 2018; Deranty, 2021; Roberts, 2005). Like an infant in front of the mirror, the subject might, for a moment, perceive themselves as a whole unified entity and become oblivious of both the fragility of their own body and of the (m)other that is affording such a specular relation. Nonetheless, it is that very gesture that marks the alienation of the I in the other, the fact that the I has to speak the terms of its recognizability in its own words, while carrying the weight of the attachments, affects, and identifications that it has established with the (m)other. For Lacan, the subject is bound to persist in recognition, in defining and redefining its specular means. Yet, such persistence serves the purpose of unconscious attachments (Arnaud, 2002), which is to defend the subject from the radical inconsistency of the symbolic as a plane that is paradoxically both universal-normative and particular-embodied.

In Lacan (1998, 2002), this is the role of the register of the Real; namely, to instantiate the impossibility of a final ground for recognition, a negativity and misrecognition brought about by the irresolvable tension between the imaginary and the symbolic. In the imaginary, the precarized subject can come to enjoy the transformative meaning of an objectively recognized vulnerability in others, and themselves. But they can do so only through the signifiers that are uniquely theirs, often developing unconscious attachments to certain symbolic anchor points (Arnaud, 2002). There are no guarantees that these discursive elements, which emerge unconsciously in their desireful enunciations, will be coherent. In fact, Roberts (2005) contends that the unconscious nature of misrecognition is at the service of self-control and enjoyment logics within broader post-disciplinary strategies of management and governance.

When we say 'enjoy' here, we refer to Lacan's concept of *jouissance*, which has many meanings in his work but can certainly involve a commonsensical understanding of appreciating or even loving something (Böhm and Batta, 2010). Yet, for Lacan, the notion of enjoyment is linked to the complicated process of striving for and experiencing satisfaction, which can also emerge when going against or 'beyond the law or socially prescribed limits' (Hook, 2017: 612). Here, enjoyment captures the pain and suffering that is often embedded in satisfaction, the fact that the subject can be devoted to 'excessive, traumatic, transgressive, unsustainable, and dangerous' practices that put them 'out-of-joint' with reality (Kingsbury, 2005: 120). Such conception allows Lacanian analysts of work to understand how workers sometimes come to 'enjoy their stress' (Bicknell and Liefooghe, 2010) or why they, however much they try, can never be 'employable enough' (Cremin, 2010).

Lacanian theory foregrounds the split between what the subject really wants and what reality is actually like. This does not stop the subject, however, from continuously attempting to fit into the world of work, trying to not only conform with the realities of the precarious labor market, but also to develop practices of passionate attachments and, at least partial, enjoyment of their predicament of having to do a job that is highly precarious. Hence, the psychosocial boundaries of the vulnerable, precarized subject's constitution are affirmed as radically ambivalent, blurring the distinction between psychic interiority and social exteriority proposed by Butlerian studies (e.g. Cutcher et al., 2022; Tyler, 2019). In the next section, we will outline our methodological framework and present an operationalization of these concepts.

Methodology

This article draws on qualitative data gathered during eight months of multi-sited fieldwork (Heiland, 2022; Hydle and Hopwood, 2019; Prasad and Shadnam, 2023) conducted by two of the authors in multiple locations in south and south-west England. As recent studies have attested (e.g. Cañibano, 2018; Manolchev, 2020), the boundaries and realities of precarious work are often fuzzy and imprecise, and hence the researchers met with informants in a variety of spaces, engaging in in-depth conversations and also making sense of the symbolic and material compositions of precarious workspaces, arriving at general depictions of worker experiences shared across different professions, trades, and

Table 1. Interviewees' details.

Gender	Male	44
	Female	60
Age	20–29	32
	30–39	34
	40–49	30
	50–59	5
	60+	3
Ethnicity	Lithuanian	2
	Bulgarian	7
	Romanian	4
	Turkish	13
	Kurdish	12
	Other	66
Occupational status	Carers	45
	Agri-food	35
	Cleaners	24

sectors. This resulted in a dataset of 104 semi-structured interviews, enriched by notes taken by the researchers regarding the locale and socio-economic context, which were subsequently discussed by all authors.

Rather than focusing on the particularities of a single case, our study addresses the multiple character of precarious work as it is lived by subjects in singular ways, foregrounding the experiential dispositions they share vis-a-vis workplaces and employers across different contexts. Sampling strategies, for this reason, were varied. Initially, purposive sampling design was used (Teddlie and Yu, 2007), according to prevalent definitions of precarious work discussed in the literature, which emphasized the low-skill, low-pay, and contract insecurity (often zero-hours) conditions of labor relations. The care and hospitality sectors were chosen for their prevalence of precarious work conditions. Managers of nurseries, care homes, and cleaning companies were contacted to negotiate access. Hospitality workers were visited at or outside their workplaces. Many informants were also reached through online social networks platforms.

These approaches allowed researchers to target potential interviewees who matched the characteristics presented above. Snowball sampling was also used, as interviewees passed the information to their acquaintances through word-of-mouth. This secondary mode allowed researchers to gain access to subjects whose social interconnectedness was proven, and hence, to verify the delimitation and meaningfulness of the precarious work they inhabited. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the gender, age, ethnicity, and occupational sector of our interviewees.

Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were conducted by two of the authors, mostly taking place in informal settings, away from the workplace, so as to elicit a reflexive stance in the interviewed subjects about their own position. Interviews were

framed by the interviewer as amicable conversations in which personal experiences rather than details of working conditions were to be shared. The interviewing dynamic followed a semi-structured design. The aim was to prompt content-driven exchanges so as to obtain meaningful narratives about labor arrangements and self-positionings within them, without constraining the subjects' desire to associate freely about their experiences (Holmes, 2013). Interviewers also fed back reflections to interviewees based on the latter's views, sharing their own opinion at times so as to lead interviewees to expand on their insights. While asking key questions about material working conditions, working times, levels of exhaustion and frustration, previous work experiences, and everyday tasks, among other objective pieces of information, interviewers strived to cultivate a sense of trust and relied on open-ended questioning throughout.

Following studies that adopt a psychoanalytic interpretive stance (e.g. Ekman, 2013; Hoedemaekers, 2018), the purpose of this approach was to invite interviewees to open up and share as many spontaneous, personal thoughts as possible. Meaningful interview data was recomposed based on two types of information, namely, fact-based descriptions and self-construals of the rational and emotional processes that subjects went through while engaged in precarious work experiences. Interviews were read in search of capturing the details involved both in the subjects' declared aspiration to recognize others and to be recognized, and in the actual processes of recognition, including its source, locus, theme, and context. Moreover, they were examined and later coded in terms of Lacanian registers of subjectivity.

As recent Lacanian scholarship has shown (Cederström and Spicer, 2014; Contu et al., 2010; Driver, 2019; Kenny et al., 2020), the imaginary register of subjectivity is crucial, which, in Lacanian theory, always relates to the symbolic and the Real (Lacan, 1998, 2002). Lacan conceives the imaginary as the inter-subjective domain in which the subject captures themselves through specular recognition, that is, by seeing themselves as a reflection of a familiar and solid other with which a certain distance can be established. In close alignment with Butler (2006, 2009), Lacanian scholars (e.g. Contu et al., 2010) stress that this instance, particularly the jubilance that the perception of similitude and conformity to others brings, has the ideological function of rendering the subject self-aware and motivated within a particular normative order, such as the order of neoliberal work regimes of precarity that are guided by values of freedom, autonomy, and entrepreneurial self-efficacy (Armano and Murgia, 2017; Moisander et al., 2018). However, for Lacan (1998, 2002), the imaginary represents a reality that is necessarily incomplete. This is because the subject's experience of recognition is always mediated by the discursive register of the symbolic, in which the subject's unconscious desire is codified.

In accounting for the imaginary, focus was placed on circumscribing narratives that were passionately expressed and convincingly told, and to markers of interpersonal tension, such as the reiterated use of singular first-person pronoun and the demands for confirming the other's attention, whether it is the interviewer's attention or the given counterpart's attention in the narrative being enunciated (Hoedemaekers, 2010). To analyze the symbolic, focus was placed on circumscribing signifiers of particular socio-cultural salience in relation to the contexts of both the interviewee and the

interview situation, and that could potentially be serving as anchors for unconscious desire, given their inevitable ambiguity and/or overlapping of attributed meanings (Hoedemaekers, 2010). In accounting for the Real, focus was placed on instances of breakdown in the narrative, in the rapport and/or in the continuity of the interviewee's speech, and also to any particular signifiers that would index an ambivalence between intended, explicit meaning-making by the subject and parallel expressions, which serve to index affective attachments, implicit rationales, and competing narratives, often unknowingly.

Approximately 80 hours of interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim into a word processor, and then checked for accuracy. Informants' details were anonymized. Interview and field notes were organized into folders and associated through a simple code to interview transcripts when pertinent. Most interviews were conducted in English while a few were conducted in informants' native languages, which were later translated into English. Following recent psychosocial work by Kenny et al. (2020), interview transcripts were read by the first two authors (who were not involved in interviewing) and then coded following broad grounded theory guidelines. The latter aimed at thoughtfully incorporating divergent but compatible theoretical perspectives into the general outline of the original method (Kenny et al., 2020: 102), an approach that well accommodated the psychosocial framework we put forward in this study.

As a first step, the first and third authors read each transcript separately, several times, to acquire a broad overview of the data. Here, interview transcripts were understood as dynamic dialogic exchanges, in which diverse renditions of precarious work experience were being enacted through the use of descriptions, images and narrative tropes, and where concrete interactions between actors and objects at the workplace were being recollected, shared, and assessed. A second step was subsequently taken by the first and third authors who read the interview transcripts again, conducting a round of inductive coding, based on our Lacanian framework and broadly following Gioia et al.'s (2013) approach. Coding focused initially on locating passages showing intense recognition interplay, where the interviewee seemed most invested rationally and affectively. These can be assumed as first order codes (see the online supplemental material in the Appendix). Selected passages were then assessed in terms of the three Lacanian registers, symbolic, imaginary, and Real, which we introduced above. Accordingly, authors 1 and 3 marked passages of textual vignettes through the use of italics, bold fonts, and underlining. Followingly, a new round of coding was conducted, which aimed at identifying emerging narrative patterns concerning precarious work experience. These can be assumed as second order themes. Once six themes were identified, a final round of coding was conducted, discerning distinctive shared qualities among themes of precarious work experience. These can be assumed as aggregate domains. Using a Lacanian methodology of psychoanalytic interpretation (Driver, 2022), this was then followed by a final step of interrogating the interview narratives for unusual, contradictory expressions, particularly moments of interruption and breakdown, signifying ambivalence (Hoedemaekers, 2010). Table 2 below shows this analytical step of Lacanian interpretation, pointing to subjects' unconscious attachments and ambivalences in their attempt to be recognized.

Table 2. Overview of empirical findings.

Coding outcomes		Lacanian-informed interpretations of vulnerable subjectivity	
Domains of precarious work experience	Emerging themes	Neoliberal values guiding desire for recognition	Key instances of ambivalence in the recognition of vulnerability [Distinctive significations found]
Procuring self-sufficiency	Self-affirming in the face of adversity	Freedom (of individual initiative)	The affirmation of an ability to procure livelihoods and to choose one's own fate (and that of one's family) ['I have sorted myself out'] overlaps with feelings of being trapped in the obligation to function within a particular set of relationships and locations, in order to survive ['I can't stay here anymore']
	Realizing opportunity through self-examination		An enthusiastic, hopeful assessment [I'm in the best position'] of the value of the experience and skills gained at a precarious job overlaps with feelings of perplexity and anxiety ['I've lost sleep'] about the difficult process of finding a new job, and of having to procure livelihoods while doing so
Dealing with others	Responding to customers / patients	Resolve	An empathetic will to learn to enjoy work/life with the other ['taking it personal for them'] overlaps with anxieties and fears in emotional labor [the 'personal']
	Navigating conflict, negotiating authority to make decisions		Feelings of pride and a sense of managerial self-efficacy ['only I had the key'] overlap with symptoms of stress, a sense of loneliness and lack of support ['no one to go to']
Coping	Persevering in the face of adversity	Autonomy	A commitment to be genuine and to define specific guidelines for one's own life, and one's own family ['I can't feel English. . .'], overlaps with the perceived need to blend in and obey the rules and customs ['I follow'] of the society one is (forcefully) located in (or has migrated to)
	Juggling relations and tasks vis-a-vis domestic environments		The displaying (to clients or other counterparts) of a commitment to always being responsive while working from home ['working hard rather being assertive'] overlaps with feelings of anxiety about the impossibility to separate the fulfillment of professional duties with the caring of family relationships and spaces in the everyday ['it can all collide']

Findings

This section presents our findings regarding the interplay of recognitions during the experience of precarious work. For the sake of clarity and relying on the coding of our empirical material, we have organized our analysis into three sub-sections. Each presents a particular domain of everyday work experience: first, the focus is on how subjects procure self-sufficiency; second, we analyze how subjects engage with others, such as clients, collaborators, and supervisors; and, third, the focus is on how subjects experience the everyday challenges of precarious work. To give the reader more insights into our data, we have included Appendix 1 (see the online supplemental material), which presents a synoptic summary of categories that resulted from our inductive coding, including representative examples of first order codes for each category. Table 2 provides an at-a-glance overview of our main empirical codes as well as key insights from the Lacanian interpretation we conducted, pointing to precarious workers' unconscious attachments and ambivalences. Quotations from interviews are placed between brackets [‘’].

Experience domain A: Procuring self-sufficiency

The first type of recognition interplay manifests the domain we have categorized as ‘procuring self-sufficiency’. The data shows subjects in their attempts to grasp images and narrative elements that can grant them a certain intelligibility of their own position of freedom within precarious work scenarios, and a sense of self-efficacy. Central themes here revolve around self-affirmation, an insistence on the subject's capacity to navigate the hardships of precariousness and find a way forward, towards opportunity. Our in-depth analysis of vignettes leads us to two versions of this. On the one hand, we account for an identification with a position that is nomadic and disciplined in equal measure, which relies on a fascinating recognition of precarious working as not belonging and being out of place, and, at the same time, as a steadfast commitment to ‘sorting oneself out’. On the other hand, we account for an identification with a position of self-development amidst conditions of insecurity, in which the subject aspires to be recognized, taking advantage of opportunities, and thus recognizing themselves as employable and functional as a qualified professional.

We have come across this particular type of precarious work experience in several interviews, for example, in the testimony of Evgeny, a male Bulgarian painter:

> I was able to apply for a national insurance number, so I applied to have some state help for my children, help towards living costs . . . I met a Bulgarian chap who invited us for a barbecue, there I said to him I can do anything and he offered me a job painting a wall . . . but then . . . he didn't pay the full amount, he lied . . . I tell you [despite these things] now I think I am alright, you know? I'm not here for one or two years like other people, the state is now paying for my lodgings, they help towards my council tax. The problem is work, this is my main problem. I have to tell you, I have sorted myself out, no one has helped me. I would like to try a different country somewhere, I don't like it [here], it's dirty. If I could go to Canada or Australia or Norway, yes, I would go through it again. I can't stay here anymore, I don't want to waste so much time. I don't want my children to adopt British culture.

Evgeny goes through the ordeal of having to procure a livelihood while looking for the next temporary, odd job, without having access to support networks. He has rough experiences of being at the mercy of those who can offer payment in exchange for some hours of handyman work. He signals the violence that the precarious job market inflicts over people who are excluded from the regular system, despite the availability of state support. He affirms a desire to be recognized as a capable individual who has shown not only willingness to comply with written and unwritten rules, but also a commitment to be self-sufficient ['I have sorted myself out']. The latter is emphasized by his wish to eventually exit the system itself.

Evgeny's tale reads as a testimony of someone who adapts (and resists) the precarizing order with a stoic attitude and an acute sense of individual initiative: precariousness is something that needs 'sorting'. However, this brings forth an ambivalent interplay of recognition, revolving around the idea of having the ability to choose how to live and how to adapt to (and resist) precariousness. At first glance, Evgeny comes across as someone who becomes stronger with each odd job he takes on as they serve as stepping stones in his upwards trajectory. He seems to be able to pursue his fate, and that of his family, wherever and in whichever way he pleases. Yet, this call for recognition, stemming from a strong effort of self-recognition, relies on an affective attachment that goes unacknowledged; namely, the attachment to a forceful and constant search for temporary jobs and aids without any certainty or security. As we notice the starkness of his stated convictions, we can appreciate how Evgeny is in fact not becoming free but rather trapped in a state of marginalization. When he enunciates the idea that he 'can't stay here anymore', he is not only expressing his desire to strive for prosperity, but also a sense of desperation about not having any options.

From a Lacanian standpoint, the contrast between modes of recognition becomes particularly clear in the enunciation 'the problem is work'. This indexes the ambivalence in which the precarized subject attempts to construct a cohesive account of self. On the one hand, the painter implies that finding a job is crucial and very difficult, and that he has won that battle, at least temporarily. On the other hand, he unintendedly affirms that the notion of 'work' itself is anxiogenic, as it implies settling down in an alien culture and thus losing one's freedom of opportunity. Here, the signifier 'work' has ambivalent connotations. The neoliberal promise of work providing prosperity and self-affirmation overlaps with the painful experience of having to procure livelihoods and perform precarious work on a daily basis.

Relatedly, this domain of precarious work experience is illustrated by British HR specialist Sheila:

> In the public sector you're always aware that . . . you might lose your security . . . [but] I've looked at [my job] as being a total package for me, in terms of transferable qualifications . . . The day I went to the meeting room and I was looking at a color-coded scheme that indicates whether your job is at risk of redundancy, nothing prepared me for that, oh my gosh, I'm the color, that's that. And how that felt, since I've lost sleep over definitely two or three weeks . . . But I've managed to work on how to restructure myself. When something at work threatens your personal life, you go back, back to the fundamentals. Yes, you had allowed yourself to get to that complacent stage, but once I got over that emotional side of things, I realized I am probably in the best position that I've ever been in my life in terms of employability.

Sheila's narration revolves around her precarious, insecure position within the public sector. The 'color-coded scheme' she talks about marks the instance in which the ground shifts beneath her feet: she knew she could be out of the job at any moment, and in fact she was. This ordeal, she reveals, is accompanied by, on the one hand, a constant feelings of anxiety, represented by the prolonged lack of sleep she reports, and, on the other, by a state of perplexity, as she acknowledges her unpreparedness and the bluntness of her termination: 'that's that'. The notable expression 'I'm the color' denotes that her job is deliberately unstable, designed as a high-turnover position, relying solely on a simplified performance assessment (the 'color'). More importantly, she speaks from a position from which the precarizing effects of such assessment are recognizable.

This dynamic of recognition that Sheila invests in, nevertheless, overlaps with a different dynamic, in which job termination provides the grounds to recognize herself, and to expect others to recognize her, as active and optimistic with regards to the existential insecurity she faces. At the same time as she characterizes the adversity she has to endure, Sheila declares that her insecure job is 'a total package for her', as if the pain of losing and then looking for a job was a kind of gift that would allow her to not only boost her objective employability, but also enable her to be self-sufficient. Sheila aspires to feel hope about the opportunities that come through self-examination, following the termination of her precarious employment. She identifies what she calls 'the complacent stages' as something she does not recognize herself in, and, in turn, she expects to be recognized as an enthusiastic and calculating individual who is capable of adopting an enterprising stance about her career.

The point of ambivalence on which the two modes of recognition outlined above seem to hinge is indexed most clearly by the notion of 'going back to fundamentals'. At first glance, the notion of 'going back' seems to be signified as the first step in a positive journey towards liberation and self-sufficiency. To go back, from this standpoint, would be about seizing the opportunity of restarting her career, and capitalizing on the valuable experience and skills gained in her precarious job. Yet, these 'fundamentals' also signify neoliberal entrepreneurialism, which, despite its clarity, Sheila is unconscious about. It is the idea that precariousness is about the tragic fate of always being 'thrown back' to the drawing board by insurmountable conditions of uncertainty and insecurity. From a Lacanian standpoint, although she aspires to be recognized as hopeful, or perhaps precisely because of it, Sheila is affectively attached to this other 'fundamental' of precarious labor: the fact that impossibility, rather than opportunity, is the norm.

Experience domain B: Dealing with others

The second type of recognition interplay manifests the domain we have categorized as 'dealing with others'. The data shows subjects in their attempts to establish grounds for coordinating, negotiating, and socializing with customers, providers, and fellow staff members in precarious work environments. The main themes that comprise this domain revolve around the distinction between personal and socially-shared spheres amidst the unfolding of precarious work, as well as the carving out of a reflexive inner space from which a sense of resolve can be composed. One notable version involves the adoption by precarized workers of a closer, personal, and more responsive stance in the presence of

those who benefit from care services (and who are often precarized subjects themselves). Another involves navigating conflict between managers and employers, and the attempts at negotiating or directly seizing the authority to control procedures and make decisions that affect the effective completion of tasks. Across these instances, we detect the subjects' aspirations of being recognized, and recognizing themselves, as dignified operators, yet ending up being stressed and anxious. Their vulnerability is marked ambivalently by both a personal sensitivity towards others and the manifold conflicts precarious work situations can create.

This type of experience is represented by British care assistant Corrie:

> I found it difficult . . . because it is end of life care and because my own Grandma is in care as well so it was a little too close to home . . . I was in constant fear of walking in on someone that had passed away and I thought I can't do that, it's not for me, and then here it's the polar opposite, we're working with interesting people, vibrant people, enabling them to do more rather than worrying about them doing less . . . When you hear a bit of negative, you take it personally for them . . . we have to remind ourselves that they're ok, they are happy, they're enjoying themselves and this is the most important thing . . . we do so much with them, we are getting just as much new life experience as they are, we are learning new things all the time.

Corrie narrates how workers are expected to display emotions for clients/patients, and to respond sensitively to them, and also to be aware of and handle their own emotions. She acknowledges a fear of death, rooted in her personal history of end-of-life care, but then she affirms a commitment with a different mode of care work, regular elderly care, which she feels contributes many good things to her life. Such an investment is based on the premise that workers are not supposed to sacrifice themselves but rather become empowered ['it's us who are getting an advantage'].

This indicates that the emotional labor Corrie is involved in goes beyond a recognition of the painful, exploitable position care workers are consistently put in by a precarizing order. Her optimism signals an alternative recognition interplay: when facing an elder other who is content and full of freedom she recognizes herself, in that familiar mirror image, as an enthusiastic worker, open to new experiences, willing to look and move forward. Corrie's convictions, accordingly, are signified as departures from the worst state of mind. She claims she is now 'vibrating' instead of 'worrying' (before), that she is doing and receiving 'more' (now) rather than 'less' (before).

It is at the level of the Lacanian symbolic where the above interplay proves to be more an entanglement than a progression, particularly around the signification of the 'personal'. Initially, Corrie speaks of work being 'too close to home', meaning the emotional toll of a job for which, according to the data, a young adult like her has not been properly trained, and which takes place in a context of precarization where there is no containment provided by supervisors or peers. Anxieties about death, in this case, have not been managed, or even conceived, as an integral part of work. Later, however, Corrie speaks about an inner psychological space, the 'personal', from which she can find enthusiasm and also sustain her capacity to display emotions and cope with anxiety. For her, getting 'personal' is about becoming capable of empathy.

Overall, the idea of the 'personal' hinges ambivalently on two narratives. The subject expresses her attachment to a neoliberal imaginary of human potential ['we are getting

just as much new life experience as they are'] while unknowingly affirming that the 'personal' (what is close to home) is not only about 'enjoying' and 'learning all the time', but also about being vulnerable to anxiety and death. In this way, the master signification 'personal' serves as an index of the Real in the interplay of recognition, marking a fundamental inconsistency in the subject's attempts to capture herself as a precarized subject. Corrie's desire to persevere amidst precarious conditions is kept alive precisely by the unconscious insistence on a 'personal' level of work, which lends itself to contradictory interpretations.

Relatedly, the following narrative by Celeste, a British waitress under zero-hour contract, captures another example of relating to others:

> I remember one day at the restaurant I was feeling so tired and unwell, I told the manager. He said you are like a child, I am 65 and I am here, and not complaining, so I stayed . . . It was lots of stress, and I had no support from him, no one to go to, no one at all . . . I had a big problem with an old, experienced employee, when I was 22 and started managing the business. He was calling me stupid, he was so upset he started stealing tips, which were very important for us, the thing that kept us going. The same thing happened at this wedding, which I am so proud of, we went the extra mile and customers were very happy, the tips were £80. Our boss said he wanted 10% of the tips . . . so I started putting the tips in a lockable box, and only I had the key.

Celeste's testimony paints a picture of the toll that precarious jobs, particularly those within the service industry, take on workers. She recalls feeling tired, stressed, and having no support network available that would acknowledge high physical or mental loads, or would facilitate some form of coping. Quite the opposite, the experience she shares seems to be about a constant friction between management and workers, often bordering on abuse. There is a sense of routine that comes across in her words, which can be associated specifically with the type of emotional labor that hospitality staff like her have to endure on an everyday basis. Her account expresses the desire to be recognized as a committed and even sacrificial type of worker, having no problem with 'going the extra mile' and enduring a significant amount of both internal and external conflict while doing so.

While this type of recognition interplay seems discernable and normal, the final part of the vignette emphasizes one particular gesture, which tells us that there is another mode of recognition at work. It is Celeste's decision to put tips given to waiting staff at a wedding in a lockable box, refusing others access to it. The confessional tone in this episode helps reveal the meaning this gesture has in relation to the recognition of precariousness. Celeste is improvising over, and indeed transgressing, the managerial order that has been set up to conduct waitressing duties, and by doing so, she actively institutes new norms for recognizing her situation. The position she occupies appears to be not only passive, sustained by an effort to withstand the constant abuse she is a victim of. She also feels pride and a sense of managerial self-efficacy that are brought about by her decision to take matters into her own hands.

Accordingly, a distinctive kind of ambivalence can be discerned in Celeste's experience. She is quite aware of being forced into an oppressive situation where she becomes deprived of support, having 'no one to turn to, no one at all'. Yet, her capacity to endure it and keep working relies on an affective attachment to a disruptive instance in which she turns to herself as her sole support system. She becomes the 'sole possessor of the

key', as she moves to act as the righteous manager of the tips. There is something notable here in terms of the complexity of recognition dynamics around precarization. This is because Celeste goes beyond the pursuit of self-sufficiency or the means to resist abuse. Instead, she turns to her sense of resolve, instituting her own entrepreneurial terms into work practice so that alternative norms can be set in place for the recognition of her peers and herself.

Experience domain C: Coping

The third type of recognition interplay manifests the domain we have categorized as 'coping'. The main themes that comprise this domain revolve around the attempt to handle negative and positive emotions in relation to the network of relationships that underpin efforts to working committedly, and the construction of an occupational and even national identity the former helps solidify. One version of this involves the subject's search for being recognized, and recognizing themselves, as a disciplined laborer, capable of persevering against the adverse side of vulnerability, not just through devoting large amounts of time and energy but also through blending in with actors in work settings. Another involves the recognition of the practical juggling that is required to keep the subject constantly available for continued labor, especially in relation to domestic contexts where household responsibilities inevitably put pressure on their ability to engage with work demands. Across these instances, we detect the subject's aspiration to juggle everything effectively, 'giving their best shot' at the job at hand and, thus, to be recognized, and recognize themselves, as being able to master their work. In this sense, subjects establish a sense of autonomy, affirming their own personal rules to regulate their constant involvement in highly demanding work, especially their legitimate right to include or exclude actors, including themselves, from such scenarios.

Coping, as a type of precarious work experience, is expressed by Alexey, an immigrant cab driver:

> I can't feel Bulgarian, I can't feel English, I can't feel American. Anywhere I go I feel Bulgarian but I'm not like other Bulgarians, those people look English, they seem to have integrated. I follow all the rules, I work non-stop and keep my head down, and if you ask English people, they wouldn't know I'm not English, unless I speak . . . I have been brought up to work from a young age and I can't not work, it doesn't matter what type of work, cleaning toilets, driving, it just doesn't matter as long as it's work to do . . . . [British people] just don't want to work, maybe, or they don't want to get dirty . . . You know, sometimes you might have to go hungry, and try and hope things get better. You don't go out, you don't smoke, and you don't look for any kind of entertainment, it's a very Spartan way of life.

Alexey's experience as a cab driver conveys an intense sense of displacement. His precarious job is about moving around the city, crossing different areas while carrying diverse passengers. Moreover, as an immigrant, he always deals with two versions of himself, one Bulgarian, the other English. He talks with concern about the problem of being a national, and at the same time, of being different from other nationals. All of these existential preoccupations seem to be muffled by what Alexey calls 'a Spartan way

of life'. He is fully invested in the discipline of working, and in preserving his capacity to keep working. As a whole, the vignette shows how Alexey, as a precarized worker, aspires to be recognized, and to recognize himself, as a 'battle-hardened' citizen who has a history of blending in and complying with the rules in the face of adversity.

Nonetheless, the starkness and tone of Alexey's testimony indicates a dynamic of recognition that diverges from the above account of a worker trying to adjust to precarizing norms and their effects. This alternative interplay revolves around the importance of being autonomous, and more importantly, around the notion of being genuine, true to one's own beliefs. As much as Alexey attempts to disappear into the crowd by following what is appropriate and customary, letting his 'Spartan' self invest fully into the routinary, he cannot help but to leave questions about his genuine self remain unanswered. He is simply too busy, 'working non-stop and keeping his head down'. Alexey's passivity, expressed by his constant, almost mindless driving of the cab, gets disrupted by an affirmation of refusing to be the assimilated subject that he thinks society expects him to be. The latter introduces something new. He aspires to be recognized as a genuine person, a unique mixture of Bulgarian and non-Bulgarian parts, and thus as someone who reserves for himself the power to decide who he wants to be, how to live, where to work, and ultimately, who to 'speak' as, and to whom.

The ambivalence between these two modes of recognition is expressed by a particular signification in Alexey's vignette. It is the claim 'I can't feel', which is indicative of the emotional turmoil that precarization imposes over subjects. In his passive, compliant stance, Alexey has a hard time getting a sense of his biographical boundaries; his feelings of belonging become absent, or irrelevant. At the same time, he cannot feel, because he adopts an active stance towards precarization; he refuses to feel how he is prompted to feel. Accordingly, going beyond the mere resistance to conformity, Alexey's capacity to persevere in the face of adversity proves to rely on an instance of unconscious disruption, in which the perceived need to follow established rules and customs turns into a passionate commitment to follow none other than himself.

Relatedly, a second example of coping can be observed in the way Emilia, a female self-employed writer, describes the domestic conditions of her work-from-home routine:

> If everyone knew my situation behind the scenes they probably wouldn't hire me as a freelancer. I have quite a few clients that don't know that I have children and I don't want to tell them, I keep that very separate. [I try to] show my professionalism through working hard rather than by being assertive, [being] available all the time. There might be a crisis . . . and the phone is going constantly . . . and I am in the park with my children. It can all collide horribly, but at the end of the day stuff gets done. Every day is about navigating things. My eldest is now 4, and he loves knowing about my work, he reads all the magazines that I do, he sits in the room while I am writing and he asks questions, he pretends to be a writer. As much as I'm keen to keep work and children separate, I am starting to see the benefits.

Emilia's account offers a glimpse into the intimate experience of working from home as a freelance writer, which is all about sharing the 'behind the scenes' of domestic space with meaningful others, defining boundaries between the personal and the professional.

She talks about the need to separate her clients and family. The latter are not supposed to appear, because she aspires to be recognized, and recognize herself, as a responsive professional. She affirms that the relationships of care that she engages in must remain separate and undisclosed, in order to maintain her reputation, preserving and increasing her portfolio of clients. There is a constant need to juggle and navigate commitments; 'the phone is going constantly while in the park'.

Emilia's vignette shows a schematic contrast between two clashing dynamics of recognition, which can be considered representative of the work-life balance challenges faced by precarized home-office workers. On the one hand, Emilia seeks to display a commitment to be responsive. She wants to be recognized as able to implement her own method of receiving requests, executing tasks, keeping up with deadlines, and above all, maintaining a functional work environment. On the other hand, she acknowledges the proximity of crisis, where 'all can collide horribly' in terms of the blurring of temporary demarcations that help to get work done.

The image she portrays of her son at the end of the vignette is telling. His presence comes across as soothing, insofar as he provides company, not only in the present, but also in the projected future. He is someone who, by sitting in the room, pretending to write and asking questions could come to empathize with and even follow her vocation. Yet, for her, the child also seems to be a sensitive presence, as she feels she should actually deny that he is there. The precarized mother whose sense of autonomy relies on recognizing herself as someone with a progressive attitude about integrating children into her professional life, re-drawing relational boundaries to match her choices, gets disavowed by the precarized mother whose sense of autonomy relies precisely on excluding intimate relationships from the scene of work.

This ambivalent interplay of recognition relies on the distinctive signifier of 'working hard'. Despite being ubiquitous, this idea captures the dilemma that she faces, as she could not tell for sure what 'working hard' means. In her own words, the successful navigation of precarious work is about 'working hard rather than being' assertive. She thinks she is supposed to make things work in her own way, showing results instead of just good intentions, including, of course, her personal relations. Yet, her alignment with this neoliberal version of autonomy is met by an unconscious attachment to harsh separations, which is what sustains her committed work ethic.

Discussion

Our analysis indicates that precarious subjects display a committed yet oscillating engagement with their status of vulnerability, which is imposed over them by the circumstances of their precarious job and a precarizing, neoliberal political economy at large. Specifically, instances of ambivalence in dynamics of recognition were found in the data, as workers accounted for everyday workplace experiences that expressed contradictory rationales and emotional attachments towards the most salient objects and subjects of precarization regimes.

Analysis of interview material shows that workers are able to discursively acknowledge, through practice and enunciation, the precariousness they are forced to navigate as well as the vulnerability they are left to confront, usually from a passive, suffering perspective. At

the same time, and through the same means, however, they express an identification with a more active stance from which positive, constructive experiences, such as learning, problem solving, and enjoying everyday life, are attainable and indeed mastered. Data shows that these active stances are narrated by workers, which can be seen as representing their constant, long-standing effort to adjust practically to precarized environments, finding meaning and purpose within them. These efforts revolve around three distinct values that can be associated with neoliberalism: freedom (of individual initiative), autonomy, and resolve. Table 2 presents a schematic summary of all the instances of ambivalence found in the data, with the last column emphasizing the distinctive contrasts between beliefs, feelings, rationales, and behaviors in precarious workers, in relation to neoliberal values and norms. These contrasts range from what could be deemed as states of cognitive or emotional dissonance, expressed for instance in the testimony of Emilia or Celeste, to instances of clear-cut contradiction, expressed for instance in the testimony of Evgeny or Alexey.

While the values of freedom and autonomy are well established in the precarity literature (Armano and Murgia, 2017; Moisander et al., 2018), resolve links to resilience (Webster and Rivers, 2019) and the belief in oneself to achieve certain goals (Webb, 2007), which are embedded in neoliberal subjectivity (Webster and Rivers, 2019). It is through invoking these values that precarized workers find the grounds to recognize themselves, and to be recognized by others, as vulnerable. This is why we qualify the recognition dynamic associated with their precarious job as ambivalent, realizing how such enthusiastic invocation works as a response to a concurrent acknowledgement of objective conditions of adversity brought about by precarization. Our findings show that the recognition interplay among precarious workers unfolds in diverse, nuanced fashion across a variety of themes and subjective positions, relying not only on conscious, rational intelligibility of precarized selves, but also on instances of unconscious attachments to the very tenets of the socio-economic arrangements that precarity emerges from.

Following Lacanian scholarship in studies of work and organization, the abovementioned ambivalence between parallel forms of recognition can be understood as a manifestation of the divided structure of subjectivity (Driver, 2019; Hoedemaekers, 2018). In particular, it can be characterized as a form of misrecognition (Deranty, 2021; Epstein, 2018; Sebrechts et al., 2019), which is inherent to the alienated mode in which the subject captures themselves as a whole image through the intersubjective medium of language. As Roberts (2005: 628) points out, following Lacan, the self 'is constituted in an essentially narcissistic moment of jubilant recognition', a moment in which 'an image of the apparent substance and permanence of the self and of an objective world that might slavishly follow its will' appears as a mirror reflection of the subject. Far from being a mythical instance of development, this site of specular recognition is instantiated through everyday coordination with others. It relies, unconsciously for the subject (who believes to be witnessing objective reality), on the particular socio-symbolic coordinates that codify such scenes of recognition within a cultural context, allowing it to be materialized. The other is the mirror, and the more the subject recognizes themselves in it, and demands the mirror image of wholeness to recognize them back, the more they miss the fact that the social life we are born to experience is always-already symbolically mediated, and that discursive elements are radically open to interpretation, always ending up meaning more (or less) than the subject intends them to mean. We can find this in the

data, most schematically in the analysis of Sheila's account of being made redundant, as she is unaware that her ability to recognize herself in an idealized mirror image ('I am in the best position') relies on an unconscious insistence on the symbolic socio-economic terms that mediate her professional future ('I am the color (on the performance assessment dashboard)').

In this case, Roberts' (2005: 628) warning about the fact that 'the identification with the image also involves (mis)taking the objectification of self for the nature of the self as an object' serves to clarify the complex recognition interplay at work in instances of precarious work. While being led to navigate a network of relationships with others who have been rendered vulnerable by precarizing systems of employment (and government), precarious workers rush to witness and then affirm themselves as equally vulnerable, passive and rather defenseless against socio-economic marginalization. What the subject gets from this gesture is a soothing sense of being in place, of understanding who they are (supposed to be) and how they (are supposed to) function in particular circumstances of precariousness. Nevertheless, the discursive means chosen to achieve this state of recognizability place the subject, without them knowing it, in an entirely different position. It is a position of activity and adaptation, codified within the neoliberal values, narratives, and emotional habits that grant precarized labor regimes a justification. Crucially, as the subject attempts to objectify their precariousness during interviews, they unconsciously express, either through reported practice or enunciation, an affective attachment to the everyday objects and signifiers that mark their attempts at making do and living with precarity.

The ambivalence in recognition dynamics at precarized workplaces is thus marked by a moment of paradox, which has been signaled by recent critical studies (Deranty, 2021; Epstein, 2018; Sebrechts et al., 2019): in order to grasp and eventually escape precariousness, the subject must persist in the (symbolic) terms and (material) conditions of precarity, so as to find a stable enough place for the ethical reconstruction of self and relations. With Lacan (1998, 2002), we can find a richer, deeper explanation for this ambivalent quality of precarious worker subjectivity, as we come to understand how the subject actually becomes divided by recognition itself (Contu et al., 2010, Hoedemaekers, 2010; Roberts, 2005). Recognition and its demand, from a psychoanalytic perspective, is always an incomplete and temporary gesture, yet it is one whose recurrence is necessary to preserve the subject's sense of agency. Recognition is always misrecognition (Deranty, 2021; Epstein, 2018; Roberts, 2005; Sebrechts et al., 2019), not so much because the reality being recognized can be misconstrued, but because the desire that mobilizes the subject – in this case the desire to understand and operate their own precariousness – needs to be constantly reignited. This point, linked to the Lacanian notion of Real, is decisive (Cederström and Spicer, 2014). The desire to transform, to thrive, to escape amidst precariousness, is what mobilizes the precarious worker and allows them to survive. Thus, the object of their desire is meant to be disrupted. As found in the data, the precarized subject unconsciously invests in an ambivalent dynamic of recognition and misrecognition in order to bolster their own agency in dire straits.

In his seminal Lacanian study of organization, Roberts (2005) contends that the alienated, unconscious nature of misrecognition is at the service of disingenuous self-control logics within broader post-disciplinary strategies of management and governance. Our

study, however, finds that misrecognition, and especially the ambivalence at its heart, has come to work more as a borderline mode of experiencing precariousness, leading precarized subjects towards embodiments that are inconsistent yet lively and functional amidst seemingly endless conditions of adversity. No longer only the expression of a fantasy veiling the subtle truth of domination for the subject (Deranty, 2021; Ekman, 2013), we believe the interplay of parallel recognitions comes to carve a new type of precarized subjectivity. For this emergent kind of vulnerable subject, the problem of domination becomes less relevant than the need to withstand the harshness of deregulation and to thread a collection of fragmented everyday experiences across territories, jobs, relationships, and homes (Bove et al., 2017; Lorey, 2015; Ní Mhurchú, 2021). Indeed, the divergence and oscillation between recognitions of what precariousness entails, as indicated by the data, proves essential for subjects to project a sense of self that can provide at least basic, temporary ontological meaning to their livelihoods. We see this, for instance, in Sheila's oscillation between feeling disposable and feeling valuable after receiving performance reviews, in Celeste's fluctuation between situations of powerlessness and empowerment in relation to supervisors, and in Emilia's ambivalent attachment to domestic spaces and relationships in her movement between the frontstage and backstage settings of her freelance job.

Accordingly, going back to the debate about the construction of an ethics of vulnerability in the face of widespread precarization of labor and life, we contend that Butlerian conceptualizations of recognition (e.g. Cutcher et al., 2022; Fotaki, 2022; Tyler, 2019) must be critically expanded so that they can take ambivalence into account. As expressed above, a Lacanian psychoanalytic reading of misrecognition through affective attachment (Epstein, 2018; Roberts, 2005; Sebrechts et al., 2019) is well suited to explain why the observed ambivalence emerges and how it is sustained over time.

From Butler's perspective, the subject cannot be assumed to be able to recognize others and themselves as vulnerable through capturing reflections or representations of what they supposedly are, because subjectivity is understood as produced by norms of recognizability (Motakef, 2019). The vulnerable subject, hence, is not seen as the direct disciplinary result of a precarizing regime (Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018), but rather as a desireful agent, whose vulnerability is the result of a recurrent gesture of self-examination in everyday interactions with other subjects in similar precarious positions. The subject's own intelligibility amidst precarity is what makes them vulnerable; the fact that precarity is indeed subjective, the result of reflexively constructing a way of being and inhabiting (Carr and Kelan, 2023; Murgia and Pulignano, 2021; Patulny et al., 2020). Notwithstanding, what a Lacanian reading contributes to this understanding of precarity as subjectively experienced – which is often expressed through a Butlerian frame (Cutcher et al., 2022; Fotaki, 2022; Tyler, 2019) – is the realization that the precarized, vulnerable subject not only connects to the norms of recognizability through rational self-intelligibility, but also through unconscious attachments. Our findings show that there is real enthusiasm for what are said to be neoliberal values, namely freedom, autonomy, and resolve (Armano and Murgia, 2017; Moisander et al., 2018; Webb, 2007; Webster and Rivers, 2019). That is, the precarized subject actively invests in invoking and acting out the very values that uphold precarity, and, hence, any attempt at an ethical repositioning of vulnerable subjectivity must take such attachments carefully into consideration.

These empirical insights re-qualify Butlerian calls (Butler, 2006, 2009) for promoting a new, universal ethos of vulnerability, which can, in turn, enable a political awareness about the relentless precarization of socio-economic bonds. As outlined in our review of the literature on ontological approaches to precarity (Motakef, 2019), such universal ethos would be about becoming aware that we are all essentially vulnerable, because of our inherent psychosocial dependency on others for care, development, and well-being since birth (Cutcher et al., 2022; Fotaki, 2022; Tyler, 2019). The point being made here is that there is always an opportunity to align ourselves with an abstract solidary rationale towards those who have been rendered marginalized and vulnerable. As Fotaki (2022: 317) proposes, it is about realizing the decisive ethical gesture of recognizing one's own dependence on the other 'without presupposing knowability or even reciprocity'. However, this relies too much on a notion of exteriority of the vulnerable other. We find that vulnerable others do not emerge for the precarized subject as unknowable or impersonal. In fact, the data shows that the subject's sense of self-vulnerability is constructed in material closeness to them, out of an affectively-intense interaction that ranges from abandonment to support, from fear to cooperation. The presence of this kind of interaction does not stand as an imaginary semblance of the effects of a universally-shared vulnerability. It rather works as a material embodiment that is imposed and shared locally through the concrete socio-symbolic means of practice and speech. The data indicates that others become recognizable as vulnerable at the workplace precisely because we can either hear them speak about their lack of voice, or we can see and feel their bodies affected in their quietude.

Accordingly, Tyler's (2019) call to resist the neoliberal, precarizing Other by disavowing the temptation to believe in and strive for full recognizability should be broadened. Our study suggests a critical approach to precariousness must also embrace the fact that precarity is already speaking through the subject's own reflexivity and their aspirations for mutual solidarity. We therefore propose we go beyond the intent to decipher and undo the way in which the other determines the subject's own intelligibility, in an attempt to comprehend at least two aspects. First, in line with recent studies of self-precarization (Carr and Kelan, 2023; Ferreri and Dawson, 2018), we need to understand how the subject finds solace and agency in being recognized as a dignified, functional agent within precarized settings, and how the recognition of their ontological vulnerability, and that of others, relies on the former. Second, in line with recent feminist and critical social geography studies (Bove et al., 2017; Lorey, 2015; Ní Mhurchú, 2021), we need to understand how the subject becomes affectively and materially attached to the everyday unfolding of precariousness through instances of self-affirmation, coordination, and enjoyment, and how the blurring of the borders between intimacy and social Otherness, and between national locales and inter-regional collectivities, might help them navigate the hardships of precarity.

In our study, we find that precarized workers are unknowingly attached to symbolic anchors of precariousness, namely to the values of freedom, autonomy, and resolve, which define neoliberal, entrepreneurial ideology (Armano and Murgia, 2017; Moisander et al., 2018; Webb, 2007; Webster and Rivers, 2019). More importantly, they invoke them to affirm the recognition of their own vulnerability. We see this in the case of Corrie who finds resolve when she is most shocked and intimidated by the emotional intensity

of her work, or in the case of Alexey who finds autonomy when he is most confused by the attitudes of his peers. In this way, our analysis shows how neoliberal values play a crucial role in animating the desire of precarized subjects. They serve as anchors and drivers for self-construal. Subjects unconsciously attach themselves to these values in order to make a living within a socio-economic order that renders them precarious and vulnerable.

Conclusion

In this study, we have analyzed dynamics of recognition and misrecognition in the context of vulnerability in precarious work experiences. The testimonies of the precarious workers we interviewed lead us to conclude that it is through the social construction of vulnerability that subjects come to find a sense of livability in settings where precariousness and insecurity are often the sole horizon. No longer conceived as the expression of a loss of life security, the precariousness narrated by workers in our study is expressed eagerly as questions about making decisions, assessing opportunities, negotiating, inhabiting (and displacing, moving around), resisting, and caring. In short, precarized workers understand precarity as the ontological production and valuation of life itself, the 'differential distribution of bodily destruction and grievability that emerges through specific social and political arrangements' (Han, 2018: 337), whose recognition allows the subject to speak and act, recovering their ethical self from states of alienation (Butler, 2009; Han, 2018; Lorey, 2015).

Our study makes two key contributions to extant literature of work and organization. First, we confirm existing understandings of the complex subjectivity-making processes of precarious workers as they attempt to navigate the often-chaotic dynamics of everyday precarity (Bove et al., 2017; Moisander et al., 2018). That is, Bove et al. (2017) and others (Cutcher et al., 2022) who have emphasized the everydayness of precarity are right to point to the subjective and subjectivity-making character of precarious work. However, we argue that these authors rely too much on an understanding of subjectivity as rational self-intelligibility, as they ultimately call on precarious workers to become more conscious of their predicament, so that their vulnerability can be addressed. Yet, our study shows that this may not be so straightforward, as the subject is entangled in a complex web of recognition and misrecognition. Mobilizing a Lacanian (Lacan, 1998, 2002) framework, we argue that precarious workers develop unconscious attachments (Arnaud, 2002) to neoliberal values, as they try to make sense of their vulnerability. In this way, precarized workers are unknowingly attached to symbolic anchors of precariousness, namely to the values of freedom, resolve, and autonomy, which define neoliberal, entrepreneurial ideology, unwittingly reproducing it. That is, it is not enough to understand precarity as an everyday, subjective process that involves multifaceted and even chaotic dynamics (Bove et al., 2017; Moisander et al., 2018). A key aspect of our Lacanian analysis has been to show the ambivalences involved in precarious workers' everyday attempts to make sense of themselves. Their subjectivity, we argue, is produced in the dynamic interplay of recognition and misrecognition that involves the very neoliberal values that have created their socio-economic reality in the first place.

Second, our study goes beyond Butlerian understandings of recognition and subjectivity (Cutcher et al., 2022; Fotaki, 2022; Tyler, 2019). We do agree with Butler (2006, 2009) that recognition is at the core of the ontological production of subjectivity. It is through the dynamics of recognition that the precarious worker makes sense of themselves, as they try to decode and identify with the societal norms and rules that put them into their places of precarity (Carr and Kelan, 2023; Hoedemaekers, 2018; Tyler and Vachhani, 2021). However, Lacanian psychoanalytic frames can help us, we contend, expand Butlerian conceptualizations of recognition (e.g. Cutcher et al., 2022; Fotaki, 2022; Tyler, 2019) precisely by taking ambivalence into account. We argue that misrecognition is at the heart of any recognition process, because the subject struggles to recognize others and themselves as a vulnerable worker. What a Lacanian reading contributes to a Butlerian understanding of precarious work is the realization that the vulnerable subject not only connects to the norms of recognizability through rational self-intelligibility, but also through unconscious, affective attachments. Our findings show that there is often real enthusiasm about neoliberal values and norms, which the subject actively invests in.

There are some limitations to our study, which open opportunities for future research. First, it must be acknowledged that our study draws on the experiences of precarious workers in the south and south-west of England, a context marked by processes of migration, deindustrialization, and class reconfiguration that are distinct to the country, and the region (Winchester, 2022). The resulting precarity of life arrangement(s) can only be considered particular. Thus, additional research is needed to comprehend the way in which vulnerability is lived through ambivalent recognition dynamics in other regional settings where precarity has become prevalent. Second, we believe the conceptual framework advanced in this article – a Lacanian elaboration of Butler's take on the ethics of recognition – could be fruitfully applied to other problems of organization besides precarious work, such as emotional labor, education, healthcare, migration, tourism, and sports, among others. The idea that social recognizability is mediated by unconscious, affective processes can open a constructive critique in organizational spaces where ethical ambivalence is seen as a flaw or an excess, rather than an integral part, and an opportunity. Hence, studies that focus on (mis)recognition in diverse efforts of organization can make a useful contribution to understanding the complexities of organizational ethics in today's complex socio-economic landscape. This would include, for example, the study of identity and codes of conduct as a problem of (mis)recognizability in tightly governed organizations, and the study of violence and suffering as a problem not only of emotion management, but also of deep affective ambivalence in service-oriented organizations and/or sectors.

As a final point, we contend that the insights presented in this study are important not only for advancing the critique of precarious work and precarized lives, but also for bringing the critique of precarity research and researcher subjectivity to the fore. As Barnett (2005) proposes, reducing the critique of neoliberalism to the promotion of a resistance against clearly determinable forms of oppression and unrecognition is missing the point, as it serves the sole purpose of bringing consolation to critical researchers regarding their analytic powers, while providing 'little assistance in thinking about how best to balance equally compelling imperatives to respect pluralistic difference and

enable effective collective action’ (Barnett, 2005: 7). If research is to be truly open to the multiple ontological ways in which precariousness is lived, enacted, spoken, enjoyed, and if the voice and material presence of the vulnerable other is to be recognized, then a desire not to fully know what precarity is should be cultivated by those who seek to understand it critically (see Fotaki and Harding, 2013; Valenzuela, 2019). This not fully knowing what precarity entails is, we believe, a guide for emancipatory forms of self-recognition, which our Lacanian analysis aimed at putting into practice in this article.

We believe there is a risk of depoliticizing the inherent ambivalences of precarity if vulnerability is to be understood simply as an exercise of recognizing recognition (or lack thereof). This is because, ultimately, what makes precariousness livable is not normative reframing by either workers, researchers, or policymakers but the ontological desire of the precarious worker to risk life itself in a precarized world. From the perspective of our findings, what is required is insisting on the interplay of recognitions and misrecognitions as well as the affective attachments that allow precarious workers to construct a sense of self. This is done within a socio-economic order of precarity, which includes neoliberal values of freedom, autonomy, and resolve. Precarious subjects develop ambivalent attachments to these values in their quest to live a life within the vulnerable position they find themselves in, desperately trying to find inspiration to transform the conditions that maintain their precariousness. Accounting for such ambivalences could, we contend, provide more agency to subjects, also in the planning of work programs or in union activities. Neoliberal values cannot simply be wished away. They are part of the dynamics of recognition that precarious workers find themselves in. An ethics of vulnerability needs to take such ambivalences of subjectivity-making into account when creating measures that aim to improve working lives.

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Supplemental material

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