



Review Article

Living a calling in precarious employment: an integrative review of consequences on professional and personal lives

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. The working life trend in recent years has been precarious employment. At the same time, people seek callings and more meaningfulness from work. Therefore, the purpose of this integrative review study is to identify, describe, and synthesize studies on precarious employment and having a calling.

Methods. An integrative review method was used. Data from eight papers were analyzed using the constant comparison method. Precarious employment and having a calling was a sparsely studied area.

Results. Precarious employment was related to job insecurity, poor working conditions, and financial burdens. More subjective characteristics were poor career management and development possibilities, limited autonomy, and tensions concerning workers' identities. However, some workers chose precarity and financial insecurity to be able to fulfill their calling. Having a calling was related to low-paid professions.

Conclusions. Precarious employment offers poor job security, career opportunities, working conditions, and low levels of autonomy. These negatively affect workers' careers, wellbeing and health and make it hard for them to maintain their calling. Employers should pay attention to the quality of working life and better recognize calling as an important resource in work. Occupational health care can support workers having a calling and who are in precarious employment.

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Introduction

A calling to a particular profession is an important career choice factor and influences career management possibilities and wellbeing. Although definitions and conceptualizations of calling differ in the research literature, it most often refers to the meaningfulness gained from work, inner urge to a particular profession, and orientation to other people (1, 2). The role of calling in working life has become more relevant with the younger generations as they seek meaning from work more often than the previous generations (3). At the same time, working life is becoming more precarious, characterized by fragmentation of work, insecurity of livelihood, and inadequate workers' rights (4, 5), and precarious work mostly affects young workers (6). The present study focused on the relationship between calling and precarious work described in the earlier literature. We found no synthesized knowledge on the relationship between these opposing determinants of working life. The study applied the integrative review method to reach both qualitative and quantitative studies. Even though the number of identified studies was low, this study contributes to the current understanding of precarious employment. Our results showed that precarious employment turns a living a calling a struggle that affects personal and professional lives and identities in many ways and makes it difficult to pursue a career. We discuss the result with having a specific interest in women because they are, along with the young, the most affected by precarious employment (6, 7). Also, implications for occupational health practices are presented.

Precarious employment

Work produces wellbeing in many ways, and changes in working life have so far improved the safety and health of workers. The change of recent decades is related to the globalization of labor, technological development, neoliberal policies, and the decline of industrial work (8). Thus, the current change, precarisation, involves demands for flexibility for workers in a way that causes more anxiety and dissatisfaction. The change has consequences, for according to studies, precarious work is detrimental to health and wellbeing (9-11). This may be due to poor physical and psychosocial working conditions, limited access to occupational health and safety measures, under-protection from social risks such as unemployment and disability, and retirement conditions (12).

Precarious employment is a complex phenomenon. The International Labour Organization (4), a United Nations agency that sets global working standards to advance social and economic justice, describes precarious employment as characterized by low-quality employment relationships and short contracts. A precarious working status does not necessarily result from poor education or a lack thereof. However, these often lead to poorly paid employment liable to problems involving worker protection and rights. Some professions that require higher education have had features of precarious work in the past or have recently experienced precarisation processes. For example, highly skilled art workers, whose career choices are often guided and maintained by calling and deep commitment, traditionally have had precarious careers.

The collective, organizational, and social dimensions of precarious employment consist of low wages and economic deprivation, limited workplace rights, social protections, and powerlessness to exercise legally granted workplace rights (4, 13). Precarious employment can be defined in two ways. First, a narrow, individual approach is based on labor market status or employment type (5). Second is a broader phenomenon of precarity that focuses on growing inequalities in society (12, 14). Growing inequality can be seen as gender differences in precarious employment. A study examined the quality of work and classified employees into working conditions profiles (15). According to Sutela et al. (15), women were mostly in stressful and heavy jobs. Only a few thought that they had good opportunities to participate in developing their work organizations' activities or their own work. Women's top professions in these heavy work jobs included social work and nursing. Several other studies show that precarious employment has increased in nursing, traditionally one of the occupations of calling (16) and led to issues such as fragmented employment relationships and insecurity (17-20). For example, the number of temporary employment contracts for nurses has increased by 50% in Canada over the past 20 years (21). In Finland, temporary employment has increased 25% in only two years, and a fifth of nurses are employed on temporary contracts (22). Precarisation process has reflected external changes in working life, such as reduced funding and the emergence of private-sector employers (18, 23).

Living a calling

However, having a calling may balance these negative job factors caused by precarity to some extent (24). A calling has been historically defined as a conviction or obligation to help other people (16). The modern definition emphasizes calling as an internal, consuming, and passionate pursuit of self-realization, and work according to calling is seen as the purpose of life (25,26). Calling has also been seen as purposeful work that has the possibility to contribute to society and a meaningful passion people experience toward a domain (1). Seeing work as a calling has been reported to increase satisfaction, both at work and in life in general (27). Several studies have associated a calling with high work performance, professional competence, wellbeing, career commitment, meaningful work, job satisfaction, and work motivation (27-30). However, having a calling also has negative aspects, including workaholism, increased work-family conflicts, and sacrifices of wellbeing (16,31). Having a calling has also been seen as a factor that helps workers feel an attachment to their work, even when they do not have job security, as it gives their life a sense of continuity and meaning (32). Younger generations are even ready to work on a volunteer basis if volunteering most motivates them (33). Allan et al. (34) found that workers who help others in their jobs experience more meaningfulness. Calling-based professions, therefore, are likely to attract young people in the future as long as they offer decent working conditions and employment relationships.

Methods

In this study, the integrative review method was used to identify and synthesize original studies based on different research method (35). The integrative review comprised five stages: identifying the problem, searching the literature, evaluating the data, analyzing the results, and presenting the results. In the first stage, a preliminary literature search on databases was conducted using different combinations of search terms for precarious employment and calling. The preliminary search showed that no previous literature reviews were found, and that gap in the literature helped develop the research aim for this review.

In the second stage, electronic and manual literature searches were performed using the CINAHL, SocIndex, PsycINFO, Scopus and PubMed databases to find English-language, peer-reviewed scientific articles published between January 2010 and January 2021. Based on the preliminary literature search and the advice of an information specialist, search terms consisting of free words and synonyms for precarious employment and calling were formulated. The preliminary literature search identified a limited number of studies in nursing science, so the searches were not limited to nurses or the healthcare sector. The reference lists of the included studies were manually searched using the same limitations as the electronic literature searches.

Two authors (MH, KL) independently selected the data using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria (35). The electronic searches resulted in 688 studies, and the manual searches provided one more study. These 689 search results were screened to select 596 studies based on their titles and abstracts and 22 studies based on their full text. A reading of the full text identified eight studies that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Empirical studies covering precarious employment and calling were included, but literature reviews, commentaries, editorials, and grey literature were excluded (Figure 1).

In the third phase, two researchers (MH, MK) independently carried out quality appraisal (35) using method-specific critical appraisal tools from the Joanna Briggs Institute (36). The two researchers (MH, MK) discussed any discrepancies until they reached a consensus. The Checklist for Qualitative Research was applied to the six qualitative studies and one mixed methods study, and the Checklist for Prevalence Studies to the quantitative study (36). Due to the limited number of studies identified, this assessment was aimed at describing the studies' quality, not excluding them from the review. The quality appraisal showed that two of the qualitative studies fulfilled seven of the ten quality criteria (37, 38) two of the qualitative studies and the mixed methods study fulfilled eight of ten criteria (39-41) and the other two studies fulfilled nine (42, 43). The mean score of the seven qualitative studies was eight of ten quality criteria. The quantitative study met nine of the ten quality criteria, but the sampling strategy was unclear (44) (Table 1).

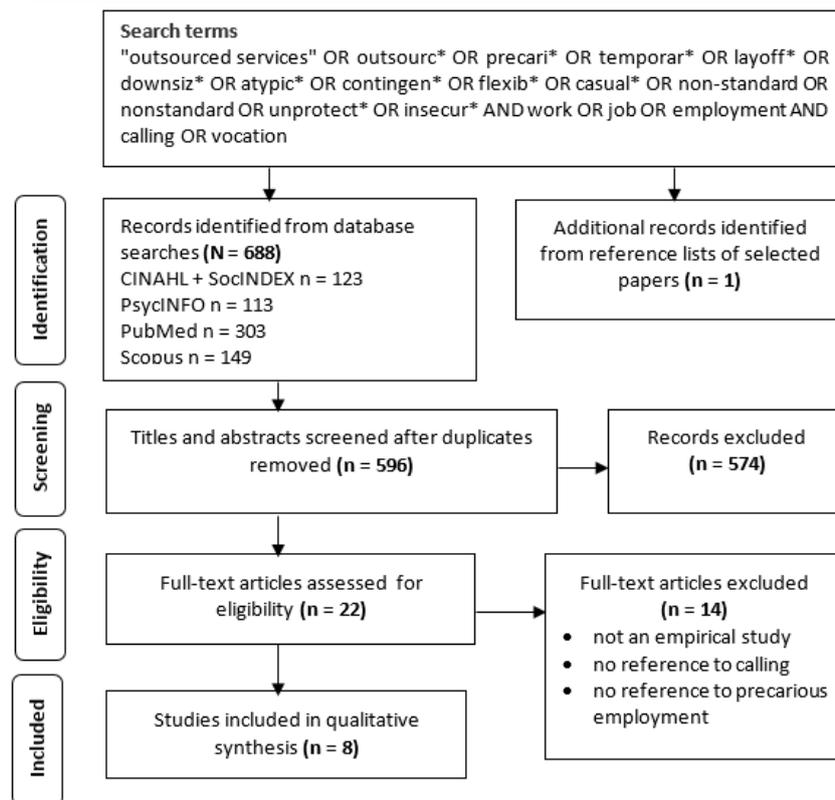


Figure 1. Flow diagram of the study selection process

Table 1. Quality assessment using JBI Critical Appraisal Checklists

Study/Question	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
<i>Qualitative studies</i>										
Bennet & Hennekam 2018	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
Cinque et al. 2020	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	Y
Coulson 2012	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	U	Y
Lysova et al. 2019	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	Y
Morgan & Wood 2013	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	N	Y	U	Y
Robb et al. 2018	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
Smith & Thwaites 2019	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	U	Y
<i>Quantitative study</i>										
Zhang et al. 2015	Y	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Y = yes, N = no, U = unclear

The fourth stage consisted of data analysis, and the constant comparison method was used to provide an integrative synthesis of the individual studies (35). The studies were read several times to get an overview of all the data. Their authors, years, countries, aims, study designs, data and methods were then extracted and tabulated (Table 2). Expressions representing precarious employment and perceived calling were extracted and grouped based on their similarities and differences. Expressions from the individual studies were compared to the entire results to ensure that the analysis corresponded to the original data. The final stage of the integrative review method (35) was to describe how the studies combined precarious employment and calling.

Results

Of the eight selected studies, six were qualitative studies, one was a quantitative study, and one used mixed methods (Table 2). The qualitative studies used in-depth (36, 40-42) semi-structured (43) and life-history interview methods (38). The number of participants in the qualitative studies ranged from 17 to 51 and included actors (40, 42), musicians (37, 38, 41) and people who started new businesses (43). The qualitative studies employed narrative (37, 38, 42), thematic (40) and inductive analysis methods (43). One study did not specify the analysis method (41). The quantitative study applied moderated mediation analysis to survey data from 263 nurses, managers, educators, engineers, and finance workers (44). The mixed methods study on creative industry workers (39) had data from 250 written career stories and fourteen interviews. Three studies were conducted in Australia, two in the United Kingdom and one each in China, Italy and the Netherlands. Findings for precarious employment and calling were organized and presented as a *career-related dimension*, *individual consequences* and *social dimensions* that helped and undermined a calling in precarious employment.

Table 2. Characteristics of the eight studies included in the review.

Author, year, country	Aim	Study design	Data and analysis methods
Bennet and Hennekam, 2018, Australia	To examine the decisions creative industries workers made about their careers.	Mixed methods Cross-sectional	Written stories (n=250) and interviews (n=14) with creative industries workers.
Cinque et al., 2020, Italy	To examine how theatre actors maintained their calling during precarious employment.	Qualitative Cross-sectional	In-depth interviews with theatre actors (n = 21). Narrative analysis.
Coulson, 2012, UK	To investigate how creative workers felt about running their own business, by examining active networking.	Qualitative Cross-sectional	In-depth interviews with musicians (n = 17). Biographic narrative approach.
Lysova and Khapova, 2019, the Netherlands	To understand how individuals experienced, enacted and sustained their calling when career structures were less established, and resources were limited.	Qualitative Cross-sectional	Semi-structured interviews with the founders of video game companies (n = 24). Inductive analysis.
Morgan and Wood, 2013, Australia	To describe the creative ambitions of young men in the music industry.	Qualitative Cross-sectional	Life history interviews with young men (n = 25) with musical careers.
Robb et al., 2018, Australia	To explore the factors affecting the psychological wellbeing of actors.	Qualitative Cross-sectional	In-depth interviews with Australian adult who were professional actors (n = 20). Thematic analysis.
Smith and Thwaites, 2019, UK	To explore composers' experiences of their working lives in music.	Qualitative Cross-sectional	In-depth online survey of emerging composers (n = 47), supplemented with interviews (n= 4).
Zhang et al., 2015, China	To test the effects of self-directed career attitude on career and life satisfaction mediated by a sense of calling and moderated by job insecurity.	Quantitative cross-sectional	Survey among Chinese employees (n = 263). A moderated mediation analysis with bootstrapping.

Discussion

This review shows that when people who have a calling are in precarious employment, it has great impacts on their personal and professional lives. The findings also show that a range of career-related, individual, and social dimensions are involved in living a calling in precarious employment. Overall, precarious employment makes maintaining a calling difficult as it reduces career management and development possibilities, as well as autonomy, self-confidence, and mental health. In contrast, having a calling provides a great source of purpose in life, and accordingly, workers prioritize their work and find solutions to cope with precarious employment.

In line with the review results (38,39) having a calling has been highlighted as an important career factor (45) even before precarious employment emerged as an issue (16). However, in the review results, precarious employment and calling are also connected to an ongoing shift from established public institutions to outsourced providers. Outsourcing could force paid workers to set up their own businesses that expose workers to precarious employment (20,37), indicating weak labor protections and a loss of rights (19). Temporary work is becoming more common in education, health care, and social assistance (21,22), sectors often related to callings, but this is not always a negative development. Some workers in the reviewed studies said that their careers offer them freedom and variety. Similarly, working temporarily can offer workers freedom from burdensome tasks and sometimes is the only way to achieve a good work-life balance (46). However, the review results indicate that women have difficulties, and precarious employment negatively affects this balance (39). This work-life imbalance highlights the importance of developing sustainable working and employment structures that help young women engage with the profession and give them opportunities to start families. Unfortunately, it is found that young women are more likely to be stuck in precarious work than young men (7).

Nursing is a good example of a female-dominated calling driven profession that suffers the precarisation development: low salaries, poor career management and development opportunities, poor working conditions, powerlessness, vulnerability, tensions regarding identity, and a lack of autonomy (17-20). Although nursing is a significant industry for women, it has little influence on collective bargaining between the representatives of employers and employees and decision-making in healthcare policies (45). Such an

existential hardship is also associated with a struggle for social visibility and recognition among the workers in this review. Another problem is devaluation, one of the theoretical frameworks defining care work in general. It has been argued that employers pay care workers less as they have intrinsic caring motives or a calling (45,47). The review results also show the exploitation of employees in the creative industries, often characterized by low pay and economic insecurity. Several of them accepted the misery of working conditions and wages because they were allowed to do the work according to their calling. According to Zhang and Hirschi (30), employees with calling value external compensation and rewards as much as other employees but ignoring calling for rewards might lead to diminished satisfaction and higher cynicism. To our review, workers who left their profession to gain financial security had identity tensions.

To conclude, this review finds that precarious employment negatively affects workers' careers, wellbeing, and perceived calling, but some workers report that freedom of choice is beneficial. In the future, it will be important to develop structures that support the wellbeing and individual career plans of workers regardless of what kind of working contract they have. People who have a calling should be supported and managed so that they can engage in their work and find meaning in it. The review results show that precarious employment is related to job insecurity, poor working conditions, and financial burdens. More subjective dimensions of precarious employment and calling are related to career management and development possibilities, autonomy, and tensions related to workers' identities. Another important implication of this review is that having a calling positively impacts their professional and personal lives. Employers need to recognize better and support this positive attribute. Occupational health care and, notably, occupational health nurses often have close and confidential relationships with employees. Therefore, they are in an excellent position to identify precarious working conditions and support employees with calling.

Limitations

The strength of this study is the production of new knowledge on precarious employment and having a calling – dimensions of working life not previously systematically combined. However, this review also has some limitations. Various terms were used to

search for relevant studies, but the concept of precarious employment has not been earlier defined. Also, we included studies where precarious employment and calling were explicitly stated. Consequently, some relevant studies might have been missed, which may have reduced the review's representativeness. The searches were limited to a 10-year period ending in January 2021 to ensure capturing studies reflecting the latest, ongoing changes in working life.

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