

# A Job and a sufficient income is not enough

*the needs of the Dutch Precariat*

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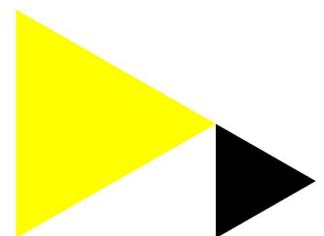
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# A Job and a Sufficient Income Is Not Enough: The Needs of the Dutch Precariat

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## Abstract

Although lifetime employment was once commonplace, the situation has changed dramatically over the last century. The group of precarious workers has increased, and with it, the size of the precariat. Although there is a body of research on how precarious workers perceive the effect of their precarity on their social, psychological, and economic well-being, there is no research on the needs of precarious workers. In this article, we report the findings of an exploratory study about precarious worker's needs. The findings show that the precariat has a diversity of needs, ranging from the need for a higher income to the need for a change in the discourse on self-reliance. Most of the needs are targeted toward the government and are not only related to labor. This is, however, contradictory to the ideology of downsizing the welfare state, in which governments focus on creating more temporary or steppingstone jobs. The needs show that the measures orientated toward the labor market are insufficient because they meet only a marginal part of the needs of the precariat.

## Keywords

precariat, precarious workers, needs, precariat needs

## Introduction

Although lifetime employment was once commonplace, it is declining in the 21st century. Social, economic, and political forces have aligned to make labor more precarious (Kalleberg, 2009, p. 8). Phenomena such as the economic crisis and the change from a manufacturing to a service and high-technology economy have resulted in the curtailment of salaries, downsized privileges, uncertain career expectations, job losses, and job insecurity (see, for example, Büchtemann & Quack, 1989; Standing, 1999, 2014). These phenomena have increased the precarity of workers. The demand for increased flexibility and the reduction of labor costs have led employers to seek a more flexible workforce (Kalleberg, 2001; Skorstad & Ramsdal, 2012). By hiring temporary workers, employers gain organizational flexibility (Smith, 1997). This flexibility has resulted in precarious labor relations in which people, especially those in the most vulnerable groups such as migrants, younger and older workers, and less-educated workers, are at risk of slipping into a permanent state of precarity.

The retrenchment of social security and the dominant neoliberal ideology in recent decades contributed to policies in which unemployment benefits are made unattractive and hard to qualify for. These policies promote paid labor as a fundamental need that makes us happy, defines us, and gives us satisfaction, suggesting that those who belong to the

precariat have only themselves to blame (Standing, 2011). Research shows that precarious workers feel powerless to change their work (Ashford, Lee, & Bobko, 1989) and their governmental relations (Standing, 2011). The above-mentioned changes have far-reaching consequences for precarious workers (see, for example, Standing, 2011), as they restrain their social, economic, and psychological needs.

A body of research has examined how precarious workers perceive their uncertainty (e.g., Schmidt, 1999) and obligations (Robinson, Kraatz, & Rousseau, 1994) and the effects of their precarious labor situation on their social, psychological, and economic well-being (e.g., Benach, Vives, Tarafa, Delclos, & Muntaner, 2016; Bosmans, Hardonk, De Cuyper, & Vanroelen, 2016). There is also a body of research on how a government's labor market and social security policies contribute to precarity through precarious work relations (see, for example, Rodgers, 2004). There is, however, no research on the social, psychological, and economic needs of those who belong to the precariat.

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Wilthagen and Tros (2004) argued in the debate on flexibility and security that the needs of employers and workers should be deliberately synchronized to enhance the flexibility of workers and the labor markets and enhance the security of workers in and outside the labor market (p. 169). To combine flexibility and security, a greater insight into the needs of the precariat is necessary. Understanding their needs is important because their needs reveal what workers want and what stops them from satisfying their needs.

We realized that an *understanding of precarious workers' needs* would contribute to the debate on the labor flexibility and social security of the precariat and offer an insight into the needs that the precariat and precarious workers have toward the government and employers by focusing on their labor-related needs. This study, therefore, addressed the following research question: What are the social, economic, and psychological needs of the precariat regarding labor?

This exploratory research focused on the precariat in an urban area in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. In the following sections, we elaborate theoretically on the precariat, precarious workers, and their needs. We end the section with a brief overview of the social security and legislation systems of the Netherlands to provide insight into the Dutch context.

## Precariat, Precarity, and the Changed Needs

Identifying a single factor or mechanism that explains the rise of the precariat and precarious labor is not easy, as work and work relations are highly diversified and finely woven into different social, political, and economic systems. Research from several disciplines on nonstandard employment, including precarious work, shows that employment diversification, the erosion of security that was embedded in labor laws and collective labor agreements, and the changed status of workers in general (Frade, Darmon, & Laparra, 2004) have increased precarious work and the precariat (Standing, 1999). The debate on precarious work, however, is dominated by globalization, neoliberalism, efficiency, cutbacks in the welfare state, shifting responsibilities (from collective to individual responsibility), and commodification. All these aspects have made the life of workers more insecure.

Research (see, for example, Siegmann & Schiphorst, 2016; Standing, 1999) shows that workers face insecurity through changing work and governmental relations. Some of the new relations are perceived by researchers as permanent changes, whereas others argue that the changes are not permanent and that they have adverse effects on employees' security (see, for example, Vulkan, 2012).

In western societies, social security systems were developed to offer individuals different forms of security by sharing insecurities and risks as a society. The idea of solidarity—sharing risks and insecurities—has decreased over time; these days, risks and insecurity are increasingly being transferred to workers (Standing, 2011). A tremendous

body of research (see, for example, Kalleberg, 2009, 2013; Rodgers, 2004) shows that work has become much more precarious, primarily in countries where dismissing permanent workers is subject to greater legal constraints (Rodgers, 2004).

Labor rights, as argued by Standing (2014), resulted in a fictitious decommodification of labor that made workers dependent on wage labor (p. 967). In the resulting recommodification (i.e., treating labor power as a commodity that can be bought and sold), governments played an ambiguous role. Workers were exposed to the flexibility of employers' needs and were expected by governments to market their own labor. Governments enforced self-responsibility by cutting back and placing conditions on social benefits, reducing social protection and being anti-collective.

The combined effects of social and labor security retrenchment changed the relations between workers and employers and between workers and government. Theories on human needs (e.g., Doyal & Gough, 1991) argue that environmental factors affect the needs and the role in how needs are expressed in behavior. One could contend that those who belong to the precariat, as argued by Standing (2011), function poorly because their needs are not fulfilled (see, for example, Doyal & Gough, 1991). Standing (2011) asserted that the precariat is able to identify what it wishes to combat and what it wants to construct, hinting at the changed needs.

## Precariat and Precarious Workers<sup>1</sup>

Standing (2011) argued that the precariat is a nascent class, if not a settled and slowly increasing class.<sup>2</sup> Others, such as Allen (2014), argue that the precariat is a bogus concept and deny that it exists as a separate entity from the rest of the working class. However, he does recognize the existence of the precarity that results from new labor relations. The precariat is defined by its members' economic opportunities and life chances, which are mainly formed around employment-related factors (Breen, 2002; Standing, 2011) that distinguish the employment relation from the ordinary employment relations of the working class (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). Due to the insecurity of labor, which originates from unbalanced labor contracts,<sup>3</sup> specific exchanges become more diffuse, which results in experiences of hardship, insecurity, and unyielding material constraints for employees (Breen, 2002; Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992).

Precarious workers have existed for as long as paid labor has existed, and in several countries around the world, precarity is widespread. The debate about precarious work has re-emerged due to the growing awareness of the growth of nonstandard forms of work and the deterioration of labor relations (Kalleberg, 2009; Rodgers & Rodgers, 1989). According to Kalleberg (2009), the restructuring of work on a global scale, the centralization of the service sector, layoffs as a restructuring strategy, and weak labor ideologies has made precarity pervasive and generalized to all sectors and jobs.

Precarious workers who belong to the precariat are the flexi workers, the unemployed, and the detached (Standing, 1999). These groups lack an occupational identity or narrative, as they are flexible in terms of the type of labor they perform, which results in them experiencing both employment and job insecurity (Standing, 2014). Precarious work in general refers to employment that falls below a standard norm (atypical). This type of work leads to insecurity, economic and social inequality, and instability at both the individual and the collective levels, in which the social and economic risks are transferred to the individual worker (see, for example, Beck, 2000; Breen, 1997; Standing, 1999, 2011).

The heterogeneity of nonstandard forms of work—such as temporary, fixed-term, casual, self-employment, and on-call and part-time work—does not necessarily imply precarious work or the precarious character of work (Olsthoorn, 2014). Insufficient income to ensure well-being is a more important factor in the experience of precarity (Büchtemann & Quack, 1989). The nonstandard forms of employment increasingly go hand in hand with low wages (minimum wage), a lack of fringe benefits and protection from unfair dismissal (e.g., due to redundancy), and low-quality jobs.

The term “working poor” was initially used in non-western European countries. These days, the term is prominent in all countries (see, for example, Lansley & Reed, 2013). An increasing proportion of paid workers in Europe who live on or marginally above the poverty threshold experience difficulties in making ends meet (Standing, 2011). The cutbacks in unemployment benefits, if they qualify for additional benefits at all, create difficulties for those who hold nonstandard jobs. Although the “working poor” are highly correlated with the precariat and precarity, it is incorrect to equate these groups (Standing, 2011).

Because of the different definitions and measurement (see, for example, Olsthoorn, 2014), for this research, we defined precarious workers as those who are paid a minimum wage, who perform temporary work with no prospect of a long-term contract (2 years or more), or who are unemployed and looking for paid work.<sup>4</sup>

## Needs of the Precariat

The precariat faces many uncertainties, as asserted by, for example, Standing (2011). Psychological research shows that certainty and security are two of the basic needs of human beings (see, for example, Doyal & Gough, 1991; Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1993). In this study, we consider needs to be the essential or very important requirements or requisites the precariat has regarding labor.

Research conducted over the last two decades leaves little doubt about the effect of subjective insecurity on social, economic, physical, and psychological well-being (see, for example, Breen, 1997; Rodgers, 2004; Sjöberg, 2010; Vulkan, 2012). The most important latent aspects related to

precarity are the higher risk of unemployment, obtaining precarious contracts, low wages (Schmid, 2010), economized social services, poverty, and alienation (Standing, 2011). These aspects indicate that the precariat and precarious workers score low on the satisfaction of such fundamental human needs<sup>5</sup> as participation, protection, and security.

The recent debate on precarious work is mainly focused on latent and manifest work-related job insecurity needs. Job insecurity is experienced when job situations are threatened due to the powerlessness of workers to keep a preferred job or a job that generates sufficient income to generate viable outcomes.

Research (Sjöberg, 2010; Vulkan, 2012) has shown that expected unemployment (job insecurity) is likely to be as distressing as actual unemployment. Research has also shown that unemployment has a destructive effect on the social, economic, and psychological well-being of workers. Unemployed people have higher levels of psychological distress (Henwood & Miles, 1987) and depression (see, for example, Jahoda, 1982), as not all of their needs are satisfied or have reached an internal equilibrium.

One of the dominant theories on well-being is Jahoda's (1982) latent deprivation theory. This theory provides insight into the benefits that people miss out on when they are unemployed. The precariat is characterized by unemployment. As Standing (2011) puts it, it is a part of their life. Furthermore, performing precarious work can be just as damaging in latent deprivation terms as unemployment (see, for example, Prause & Dooley, 2001). This makes the theory useful because the benefits reflect the needs.

Based on the theory, it can be argued that paid work provides both manifest benefits (associated with needs related to income) and latent benefits (associated with meeting social and psychological needs). Both types of benefits foster manifest and latent needs. Jahoda (1984) stated that individuals “. . . have deep-seated needs for structuring their time use and perspective, for enlarging their social horizon, for participating in collective enterprises where they can feel useful, for knowing they have a recognised place in society, and for being active . . .” (p. 298). The manifest benefits are required to satisfy the basic needs, which make manifest benefits the main reason why people perform paid work. The latent benefits arise when people are engaged in paid work, and these benefits are needed to satisfy social and psychological well-being. Jahoda (1981) argues that employment imposes a time structure, creates shared experiences and contacts, gives goals and purpose, provides personal status and identity, and enforces activity. These latent “objective” consequences of employment help explain why paid work is socially and psychologically supportive. She argues that even when the unemployed are paid liberally, they do not enjoy their “leisure” because they lose their self-respect and their sense of time. Unemployment reduces individuals' control over their life situation and life direction (Fryer, 1987).

The precariat (which mostly consists of unemployed people) and precarious workers (flexi workers) lack both manifest and latent benefits, which makes it harder for them to satisfy certain needs that are related to and dependent on paid work.

Jahoda (1982) has provided insight into the effects of unemployment on social psychology. She argued that employment fulfills manifest and latent functions that meet basic human needs. She also argued that manifest needs play a role but that the latent factors explain the main effect on mental well-being. The manifest factors are those that are related to the employment terms associated with having a paid job, such as a salary, a contract, and fringe benefits. The latent need factors are those that are experienced as a result of employment, such as time structure, social contact, sharing of common goals, status, and activity. This implies that unemployment and job insecurity erode manifest and latent needs.

Other theorists have studied several aspects of insecurity and developed theories to explain the motivation of people to work (e.g., Herzberg et al., 1993). Herzberg's two-factor theory is one of the most widely used theories regarding workers' needs. The theory incorporates two need-experience dimensions that refer to first-level factors (objective aspect) and second-level factors (subjective meaning of an individual; Herzberg et al., 1993). The job satisfaction factors are divided into hygiene and motivation factors. The hygiene factors relate to supervision, interpersonal relations, physical working conditions, salary, company policy and administration, and security. Herzberg et al. (1993) defined job security as "those features of the job situation which lead to assurance for continued employment, either within the same company or within the same type of work or profession" (p. 41). The motivation factors include achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, and advancement. These factors lead to positive job attitudes, as they are needed for self-actualization. Although these factors tell us something about the needs of those who hold jobs, they also give us insight into the factors that are important to the precariat and those who perform precarious labor.

Organizational behaviorists and psychological theorists on security have shown that humans face essential and existential insecurities. A basic need provided by society or the opportunity to fulfill a basic need is essential for humans to improve their security. Due to external events and pressures that generate existential insecurities, the precariat and precarious workers are likely to formulate needs that will reduce the existential insecurities. Given the distinct forms of insecurity, the needs will also be related to improving collective, corporate, and individual security.

In addition to these organizational behaviorists and psychological theorists, Standing (2011), a labor market theorist, contended that those who face precarity lack the seven forms of labor-related security (p. 10), namely, labor market security (adequate income-earning opportunities), employment security (protection against arbitrary dismissal), job

security (ability and opportunity to retain a niche in employment), work security (protection against accidents and illness at work), skill reproduction security (opportunity to acquire skills), income security (assurance of an adequate and stable income), and representation security (possessing a collective voice in the labor market).<sup>6</sup> These forms of security reveal the needs of the precariat. These security forms, supported by the motivation theories of Herzberg et al. (1993) and Jahoda (1982), were used as a coding framework in this research.

## The Dutch Context

To understand the needs, here we give a brief overview of the Dutch social security and labor market systems.<sup>7</sup> We focus on the new Participation Act to understand the legal and labor context of the precariat in the Netherlands.

The structural unemployment of the last decade has increased the pressure on governmental spending on social benefits in the Netherlands. The rising costs have led to a debate about the tenability of the safety net that is offered to those who receive social benefits. The debate resulted in a cutback in social benefits that led to "workfare" policies, in which a large proportion of those dependent on welfare assistance were required to perform paid or unpaid labor. The changes also indicate a shift in public opinion on social benefits for those who are or become unemployed.

These workfare policies were supplemented by a retrenchment of employment protection laws. The retrenchment was mainly prompted by the dominant neoclassical economists' view that more employment could be created if employers were subject to fewer such laws.

The government aims for a flexicurity model (see, for example, Wilthagen & Tros, 2004) that primarily improves the flexibility of the labor market using a "reflexive" labor law strategy. This strategy is obtained, defined, and modified in a constant dialogue with the stakeholders, namely, government, trade unions, and employers' organizations. The dialogue, however, is dominated by a neoliberal ideology. The social welfare system still offers security but in a reduced form, leading to more precarity.

The Dutch government aims to achieve the participation of all citizens through its new "flex law," which is intended to minimize the gap between those with flexible and those with permanent contracts. After 2 years, a temporary contract must be converted into a permanent contract. The government hopes that this measure will improve labor market effects by improving the legal position of employees (strengthening the position of flex workers), simplifying dismissal and reforming unemployment benefits by reducing their maximum duration.

Along with the flex law, the government also introduced the Participation Act,<sup>8</sup> which promotes work for unemployed, low-skilled, and disabled persons through subsidies to employers.<sup>9</sup> It requires people to perform, according to

their ability, either unpaid work (volunteer work) or socially useful work (work in addition to labor that does not displace existing labor) to receive or to apply for social benefits.

It is argued that although these policy initiatives are quickly phased-in as responses to the crisis, they reflect a more fundamental reorientation in managing and dealing with the risks of unemployment (see, for example, Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2015).

The Act aims to recalibrate responsibilities between government and citizens. The line of thought in this Act is that labor, care, and social support are first and foremost the responsibility of citizens. In this responsibility discourse (social compulsion), citizens are prospected as individuals who are self-responsible for their labor participation. This runs the risk that citizens respond with counter-responsibility claims (Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013) and an increase of distrust in the government (Standing, 1999). Those who belong to the precariat are particularly likely to respond in this manner because they have certain unmet social, psychological, and economic needs that diminish their self-responsibility.

Although the effects of the flex law and the Participation Act have not yet been measured, anecdotal evidence suggests that employers terminate temporary contracts just before the 2 years are up, and that people are not eager to perform unpaid, socially useful work in return for the social benefits they receive.

## Method

We conducted this exploratory research in an urban area of Amsterdam. The area has higher levels of unemployment, poverty, and ethnic diversity than most other urban areas in the Netherlands. We chose this area because of the increased likelihood of finding people who belong to the precariat. However, getting them to participate in the research was difficult. They were suspicious because they did not see any benefits for themselves. We often heard “What’s in it for me?” or “If you [the researcher] have a job for me, you’re welcome.” The possibility that we were collaborating with the local government also deterred people from participating in the research. Due to this suspicion, mainly of government and government-related organizations, we used existing groups for focus group meetings. Using focus groups changes the participants’ role from an individual to a collective voice, which is likely to make them feel more comfortable about discussing their needs.

Because most of the participants in the groups knew each other, we thought it likely that some of them would feel inhibited about speaking freely due to group dynamics, hierarchy, and power. To reduce this possibility, the groups were led through an open discussion by a skilled researcher, who was instructed to generate a rich discussion that involved all participants. However, not all participants and groups spoke freely. Some participants showed signs of inhibition (e.g., asking for confirmation from other members).

Due to the distrust and the anticipated inhibition, we made the focus groups as simple and as accessible as possible (free of obligations and no registration, because not all participants felt comfortable about giving their family names).

## Participants and Procedures

Given the diversity and the broad definition of the precariat, several focus groups were needed to produce valid results. All of the groups had different backgrounds, interests, and storylines. The heterogeneity and exploratory character of the research led to 29 focus groups, because saturation was hard to research. The 29 groups consisted of 343 participants, of whom 180 were men and 163 were women, representing 31 different nationalities. The groups consisted of 12 ( $SD = 4.1$ ) participants on average and were made up of employed (precarious workers) and unemployed workers, such as cleaners, artists, temporary workers, working students and housewives, of different ages, ethnic backgrounds, legal residency status, and education levels.

The focus groups were held in February and May 2015. Each meeting lasted 60–120 min, although not all of the time was spent talking about the subject. After planning the focus groups with the key figures, one researcher and one assistant researcher conducted the groups. The researcher was instructed to use the prestructured open-ended questions and only to probe during the discussion when clarity or focus was needed.

The majority of the focus groups were audio-recorded. Unfortunately, some of the participants did not give permission to record the focus groups, mainly because of the vulnerability of recorded voices (e.g., the focus group with Moroccan women argued that recorded voices are vulnerable in the age of the Internet). Therefore, we used the reports of and the notes taken during those focus groups in our analysis. The audio-recordings of the other focus groups were transcribed.

## Data Analysis Method

We used the concepts from the literature to code the transcripts to grasp the needs of the precariat in a grounded theory approach (e.g., Charmaz, 2014). We tried to maximize the reliability (stability, accuracy, and reproducibility) of this research by following the guidelines of Krippendorff (2012).

We attempted to maximize reproducibility by having the transcripts coded and analyzed by two researchers separately. The codes and related quotations were analyzed and organized into needs. After coding, the researchers compared and discussed the differences in findings and interpretations. The findings on which the researchers disagreed were omitted. Ultimately, a picture of the needs emerged, and they were discussed by a group of researchers who participated as moderators.

However, it is important to note that the needs identified in this article were raised by the participants but were not mentioned in all of the focus groups. For some of the needs,

there was a high level of agreement within and across the groups, and some of the needs were addressed by all groups (e.g., the need for a higher income), whereas other needs were only expressed in a particular group. Because of the exploratory character of the research, we decided to report all of the needs in this article.

## Results Analysis

### *The Need for Transparency and Trust*

One of the most striking needs discussed is the need for transparency. The respondents said that they needed the government to be clear about what it expects from those who belong to the precariat, how people can take care of themselves without the support of the government, and what the participation society means besides cutting costs. A respondent who talked about the support of the government said,

We need the government. We cannot do everything by ourselves. Who is going to repair the asphalt [road], can you do it yourself? Who's going to pay the hospitals? . . . We pay [Taxes] for everything [but cannot realized by our self's].

*Respondent who talked about clarity said,*

Being forced to take part in the “participation society” gives me the feeling of cost cutting measures [because it is not clear way we should participate] . . . Participation [society] is just a money issue.

*The data show that it was not clear to the respondents what the reforms entail and why the responsibility for an income and labor has been shifted to those who cannot find or hold a paid job. A respondent said,*

The situation we are in now [without work in a participation society] is the result of bad government policy. What I hear is that in a participation society, as citizen, I have not only to bear up the consequences of this policy [responsible for getting a job] but also build-up this policy on my own without getting any penny [help] or getting something back for it.

Most of the participants were skeptical about the transparency of the government; the results show widespread mistrust of the local government and politics in general. This mistrust is fed by the consequences of the regulations and the way the government checks up on those who receive social benefits. *The respondents said that they need a relationship with the local government that is based on trust rather than distrust. The new regulations were viewed by the respondents as an indication of distrust rather than trust. Furthermore, the respondents' distrust of the government is fed by its strict discipline. The respondents experienced the strict discipline as a paralyzing force that causes counterproductive behavior regarding the participation society. A respondent who talked about discipline and transparency said,*

In the “participatory society,” the government appears to function on the basis of a business model based on money making, cost / benefit considerations . . . which again means even more control [policy]. It [policy/rules of the government] kills initiatives of citizens . . . initiatives aimed at meaningful/ useful work, that contribute to the neighborhood, are in conflict with the government's vision.

The cutbacks in social benefits and the government's withdrawal from public services in the Netherlands as a mean of reforming the welfare state into a “*participation society*,” in which the tasks and responsibilities are partly shifted to the market, society, and mainly the people themselves, seem to have caused a lack of clarity. This made the role and the policies of the government unclear to the respondents.

### *The Need for Help and Understanding*

The respondents said that the local government does not know or understand their needs. They also said that governmental agencies are keener on applying inflexible rules than understanding their needs. Understanding would lead to a looser interpretation of regulations. They emphasized that agencies should turn a blind eye to some rules to make it possible for people to become active rather than be paralyzed by regulations. This is necessary to give the precariat the opportunity to get out of the downward spiral they believe they are in. It was argued that the regulations and methods of enforcement pave the way to the isolation of certain groups within the precariat. There was, in general, a feeling that they (and their situation) were not understood and could not make themselves understood, which gave them the feeling of powerlessness and alienation. One of the participants who expressed a feeling of lack of understanding, frustration, powerlessness, and alienation regarding the government (politicians and politics)<sup>10</sup> said,

I intend to find a political party [because I'm not heard/ understood] . . . I could be a member of or vote for the party, but it will do nothing for you now and it will do nothing for you in the future [it will not listen to your needs when elected].

The respondents said that they need help from the government to get out of socially and economically undesirable situations. The need to solve the problems that cause the undesirable situations is considered by the respondents to be a necessary condition to leaving the precariat. One of the participants who wanted to be clear that help is needed to solve his social situation to be able to look for a paid job, which would probably get him out of his precarious situation, said,

My wife is very sick and she is no longer going to get better. Nobody is going to care for her . . . Nobody will take care of her . . . I do everything that is needed. [That is the reason I'm not looking for a paid job] . . . Yes, I have the feeling that I can do everything I want, but sometimes I do not know what to do. Sometimes I want to go away from home, because it is very hard [to live in the situation I'm in].

### *The Need for a Higher and Stable Income*

The participants stated that they need a higher income and more tax benefits to make a “normal” living. The wages they receive when performing paid work or the benefits they receive from the state are considered insufficient to lead a normal lifestyle. They also said that their wages are barely sufficient to pay their fixed expenses (rent, gas, water, electricity, and health insurance). The need for a higher income was driven by the desire to live without having to worry about the basic necessities of life (e.g., food, clothes, and rent) and to also be able to afford to do things (e.g., visit an amusement park) during their leisure time, to have a financial buffer (to cover, for example, repairing home appliances or the car), and to save for the future (e.g., nest egg and retirement).

The respondents also needed a stable income. The income of respondents who had paid jobs depended mainly on the number of hours they worked. This caused fluctuations in their incomes, which gave them a feeling of insecurity since it is hard to plan a financial situation with a low and fluctuating income. They need stability to cope with daily expenses and thereby reduce their financial worries. One of the participants who made an argument about the need for a higher and more stable income to be able to stop worrying about his financial situation, said,

The fixed income is important because we have a lot of expenses. Everything is expensive. With two children we cannot, for example, go to the Efteling [an amusement park] during the school holidays. A fixed income is needed to be sure that we have security, and that we do not have to worry about them [expenses]. The amount we earn is never enough, but we have to cover our fixed costs plus a bonus to be able to do something during leisure time and [save] for the future.

### *The Need for Realistic Job Demands and Equally Distributed Jobs*

The participants also reported a need for more realistic job demands. Employers demand more work experience and qualifications than are actually needed to cope with the jobs they offer, according to the participants. These high demands reduce their likelihood of being hired since they have little to no experience or a lower qualification. Younger participants in particular said that they were not able to get jobs as they lacked work experience and that if they were not given access to jobs, they were not likely to gain any experience in any one profession. This results in younger workers gaining fragmented work experience, which in the long run is likely to limit their labor market entry (see, for example, Standing, 1999). A participant who talked about job demands said,

Employers want someone who is 17 years old, with several qualifications and a lot of work experience [not realistic]. A decade ago this was not the case at all.

Besides realistic demands, the participants also said that they needed jobs that are equally distributed geographically (i.e., jobs that are not concentrated in one area) and that match their capabilities and needs. They argued that jobs that match their capabilities and needs are probably available somewhere else in the Netherlands but not in the area in which they live. Applying for jobs in the surrounding areas involves costs (e.g., traveling expenses) and inconveniences (e.g., traveling time). This, in combination with a low income, seems to prevent them from applying for jobs outside the area they live in. A respondent said,

The problem is that there is not always work available in towns people live in. [ . . . ]. The problem is that not all traveling expenses are compensated. Some people have a lot of travel expenses [high expense given the low income] that are not compensated, so it is also not attractive [for people] to look for work outside the home area [towns].

### *The Need for “Real” Jobs and Contracts*

The participants stated their need for “real” labor contracts and jobs. A real contract offers a fixed and sufficient number of working hours to earn an adequate salary, according to the respondents. Most of the respondents who received social benefits said that they wanted a paid job but hesitated when receiving an offer of a “nonreal” job. The local government has several labor programs in which it offers jobs it considers gateways to real jobs. Those who receive social benefits must participate in those programs or have their benefits cut. Sacrificing the security of social benefits for a temporary job (e.g., a labor market reintegration job) causes insecurity and stress, because reapplying for social benefits takes time and effort. Temporary “paid” jobs are considered to be nonreal jobs as they offer insufficient income (mostly equal to social benefits) and insufficient career prospects and are, therefore, not favored. It is, as one participant said, “work for nothing.” One of the participants said that the jobs they get or have to perform are not “real jobs” in the sense that they only get a small reward compared with the social benefits:

In accordance with the social benefits office, since we all receive social benefits, we need to get started [attending the programme], but we get very little money for it [to perform the job]. We work for a packet of cigarettes. This means that we are not rewarded for the work we do, so there is no motivation to do this work.

### *The Need for Equal Access*

The participants need equal access to jobs with the same amount of effort as those who are less likely to be discriminated. There was a general feeling among both younger and older respondents, but especially among younger immigrants, of not having equal opportunities to get a job. They face discrimination in the labor market when applying for jobs. The feeling of unequal access and fewer opportunities

seems to have discouraged most of the respondents from applying over and over again. One of the participants who described the frustration and the inequality said,

There are many companies who only hire Dutch people instead of other people with a different background [such as immigrants]. If that changes, then we could find a job more easily.

### *The Need for Protection and Access to Good Jobs*

A group of participants who worked in the cleaning industry said that they felt exploited and needed more protection. Their contracts, in their opinion, offer insufficient protection against exploitation. They said that they face work stress due to work tasks and the fear of having extra work hours cut. Most of them had part-time contracts because the employer had not offered them full-time contracts. This, in combination with a minimum wage, resulted in most participants, especially those with only one household income, having several jobs. This increased the stress and reduced their leisure time (e.g., time lost during transitions). One of the participants stated,

I work in the hospital [doing housekeeping]. It is a part-time job, besides my cleaning job [also part-time]. People [who work for the cleaning company] work in different locations and different jobs; sometimes they work here [the cleaning job on this location] for just two hours. We get a small contract [part-time contract]. The employer spreads his risk. With these small contracts we remain flexible [to the employer].

The respondents argued a need for access to good jobs. Most of the precarious workers, especially the immigrants, held or were offered jobs that can be considered bad jobs (low income, low autonomy, hard work, low status). According to the participants, higher quality jobs are jobs that offer pleasure, pay overtime and sick days,<sup>11</sup> compensate for seasonal work, and enable a good work–life balance. One of the participants, who saw how people in his immediate vicinity struggled a bad work–life balance in a low-quality job, said,

[ . . . ] work also contributes to your happiness in life. Some people are working so hard because they work for a minimum wage, they are almost completely wrecked. People return so tired to their homes that they almost cannot do anything after work. Some people are so proud that they don't receive benefits. That keeps them going: working. The toll they pay is high, because they wreck themselves. The work ethic of working hard does not always make you happy. People who are at the bottom suffer heavily.

### *Educational Needs*

One of the needs the participants mentioned is the need for education to develop themselves so that they can enter or re-enter the labor market, increase their labor market

opportunities, increase their income, and improve their career prospects. The participants said that they wanted to learn new skills, as well as update their skills and have them certified, for example, by getting a diploma or certificate for the work they have done (e.g., driving a forklift). Most of the participants performed activities, such as voluntary work, that contributed, in their opinion, to their development. They said that they believe that volunteer work is necessary to build work experience and to learn the new skills that employers are looking for. This is driven by the need to build their resumes, as it is very important for resumes to be updated and upgraded. However, most of the participants, especially those belonging to minorities, face difficulties getting an internship during their education.

Among the foreign participants, there was also a need for free language education. They consider language lessons a necessity to enable them to participate in the labor market to get out of the precariat. Language lessons are free of charge to those who receive social benefits but not to those who have paid jobs, who, therefore, must pay for the training, which is a burden because most of them work for the minimum wage. One respondent said the following:

We need education. I'm obliged to take Dutch language lessons, and that is fine, but I have to pay for the lessons myself. We need free education. I actually work for almost nothing [and thus cannot afford the lesson].

The need for free education concerns not only language lessons. Because of rising education costs, the participants, especially the women, were concerned about the education of their children. They worried about the costs and the debts their spouses have to take on to be able to study and find more labor market opportunities. One of the participants said the following:

In the near future, children [from the precariat] who want to study will have a debt [to the government] of 50,000 euros after their study. In the near future, studying will only be affordable for the elite and no longer for people who just have a low income.

### *Social and Psychological Needs*

The participants without paid jobs reported a need for social interaction. Most of them were looking for work because they missed social interaction. Paid work, in one respondent's opinion, gives them "work power" (strength from work), a routine, a daily aim, access to social interaction, and sociability. Some of the participants said that without work, they are bored, feel purposeless, and idle. Those with paid jobs noted that they needed a good work–life balance, as most of them held contracts that did not offer such a balance.

In one of the groups, a participant stated that psychological help is needed by those who lose their jobs, especially those who have worked for several years. They said

that losing a job has serious psychological consequences (see, for example, Gallo, Bradley, Siegel, & Kasl, 2000). The safety net should provide those who lose their jobs with new aims and new social relations. One participant commented on how losing a job had psychological consequences:

It is also so depressing for the people who have become unemployed. Some people cannot handle the burden of unemployment, especially if they have always worked. Slowly, they become depressed. And some people do crazy things [commit suicide]. Losing a job is depressing.

### *The Need for a Change in Discourse and Representation*

The change to a participation society has changed the discourse on citizens' reliance on the state. The discourse promotes the idea that the precariat is sufficiently capable of grasping opportunities that will lead to labor. The discourse on the precariat's ability to fulfill its work- and labor-related needs is based on false premises, according to the respondents. They said that the government has unrealistic (too much) faith in the abilities of the precariat to arrange its own labor. The respondents said that a change in the discourse will help to reframe the government's assumptions about the self-reliance of the precariat: therefore a need for a change in the self-reliance discourse.

Most of the participants also said that they need a positive discourse on unemployment and the receipt of social benefits. Their arguments revealed a feeling of inferiority that was caused, in their opinion, by negative discourses. They generally felt that they were being disparaged by society, by the tone of politicians, and by the way they were treated. In the main, and especially in the populist discourse, people who receive social benefits are portrayed as potential cheats, lazy citizens, and villains who take advantage of those who have jobs. The precarious workers need the state and politicians to change this discourse:

The government aims for full employment as the standard [by promoting the participation in society and policy]; therefore they [the authorities] are sending out a message that is related to the work ethic. The ethic that you have to work otherwise you are piteous, or don't count [as a fully-fledged citizen] [ . . . ] That is the label that people [who don't have a job] get.

Along with the need for a change in the discourse, the respondents also said that they need to be represented by the government. Especially those who are not likely to find a paid job have a higher need for government representation. This involves taking action with regard to the labor market by, for example, stimulating employers to hire people from the precariat. The government, in their opinion, should represent the precariat in the labor market by arranging and protecting the precariat's interests.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

This exploratory research revealed a range of needs that are related to labor. Several needs are associated with the desire to have a sufficient and stable income to live an untroubled life. The precariat needs an adequate salary from labor, full employment according to one's means and needs, equal access to jobs, equal distribution of jobs, and availability of suitable jobs of acceptable quality. It also needs protection against exploitation (e.g., unsociable hours, insufficient hours to accomplish work tasks, and unpaid overtime) and short-term "empty" contracts that do not offer any prospect of a career, a higher income, or personal growth.

Most of the needs, including those regarding labor, income, and education, are considered the responsibility of the government. The emphasized needs contradict, to a certain extent, the shift the Dutch government is aiming for: more individual responsibilities and fewer responsibilities for the government. The needs of the precariat show that the new roles and responsibilities are not clear to them; in addition, the government is blamed for not fulfilling several needs. The precariat does not seem to consider that other institutions, for example, trade unions (see also Park, 2016), could help them to satisfy some of their needs (e.g., the need for protection, access to jobs, and representation).

The needs of precarious workers show that they are not able to create their own social and financial safety nets. They do not seem to have the power to change their position toward employers and the government, that is, to change the new relationship. Their needs also show that the precariat is mentally insecure, stressed, un- and over-employed, alienated, and motivated by fear (see also, for example, Standing, 2011). Their needs point toward a complex role of the government: the role of facilitator and mediator at both the individual and the collective levels. The mismatch of expectations, the strict enforcement of rules, and the shifting responsibilities seem to increase the distrust and alienation of the precariat. This bolsters the argument of Standing (1999) that the precariat distrusts the government and is alienated from society.

The respondents emphasized several manifest needs, although most of the needs are not directly related to labor. The needs of the precariat and precarious workers are not the same as the needs of people who do not belong to the precariat (see, for example, Jahoda, 1982). However, some of the needs of the precariat show similarities with the latent consequences of unemployment described by Jahoda (1982). The needs of the precariat clearly indicate that they particularly lack the social and psychological consequences that are related to employment. These consequences are evident in the needs for social and psychological help, a higher and stable income, "real" jobs and contracts, protection, and access to good jobs. The needs of the precariat are unique in that they involve more than the social and psychological consequences of unemployment described by Jahoda. The needs

show the economic (e.g., sufficient income), political (e.g., trust in the government), and institutional (e.g., unrepresented by nongovernmental institutions like the unions) consequences of belonging to the precariat. These consequences are clearly displayed in the need for change in the discourse, transparency of the government, and the need for political representation. Furthermore, the needs of the precariat are imbued with attempts to find an untroubled way of living. Most of the needs are related to escaping the poverty trap rather than the unemployment trap.

The needs show that political measures to reduce the precariat as a social class must be tailored to the people in a particular area (e.g., free language lessons in areas with a high density of immigrants or more jobs in areas blighted by structural unemployment). The needs also show that measures such as promoting self-employment, creating temporary, steppingstone, and work-reintegration jobs are likely to be insufficient, because these measures solve only a marginal part of the needs: these measures are mainly aimed at fulfilling only one need. Furthermore, the social, psychological and economic related needs of those in the precariat are not likely to be solved with a one-size-fits-all policy.

Although employers are held accountable for some of the needs, the precariat believes that the government should force employers to change their employment policies through labor market policies that are based on the needs of the precariat. The propagated “participatory society” with its labor market flexibility and self-reliance could be improved by incorporating social and economic aimed needs into policies. This will improve the flexibility of the modern labor market. By protecting (e.g., rights, including workplace rights based on the needs) and empowering (e.g., through free education to make them less vulnerable) them it is less likely that they will be trapped in to precarity; they also will benefit from the flexibility. The governments need to satisfy the needs of the precariat by supporting and investing in the needs.

The Dutch flexicurity model, however, mainly concerns the flexibility of labor and the prevention of unemployment. Given the needs, it can be argued that the current model accounts only marginally for the conditions and consequences of flexicurity. A pluralistic risk management strategy in which responsibilities for all labor market groups are shared by government and social partners is needed to improve the model, and thereby the conditions and consequences for the precariat who need new forms of security (see also Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2015). In this strategy, unions are the most obvious social partner to defend the rights of the precariat in the broad sense (see also, for example, Thornley, Jefferys, & Appay, 2010).

Despite the effort of unions to reduce precarious work, and so precarity, the steady rise of such types of employment relations shows that the union have not succeeded in curbing the trend (Keune, 2013) by mainly represent and defend mainly the interests of their members. They are not reaching those in insecure work, including those who need representation and

protection (e.g., Franks, 2016; Keune, 2015). They are still locked into a more traditional model of supporting only the organized workforce. Given needs such as protection (e.g., the right to a sufficient living wage, degrading treatment, and protection against unemployment) and representation (e.g., support human and workplace rights despite the political discourse and climate), the unions also have a role to play in the improvement of workplace right. As argued by Keune (2015), they also need to oppose the existing system, represent, and protect the interest of a society at large, foremost the weaker groups such as the precariat even if they are not a member of a union.

### *Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research*

This exploratory research was conducted in an urban area. The findings indicate that the needs of the precariat are affected by the area they live in. To a certain extent, this limits the findings of this research. Research in different areas and in countries with higher and lower unemployment and poverty rates and different local government approaches could improve on the findings reported in this article.

The drawback to making the focus groups accessible and free of obligations was that several participants turned up late and/or left the meetings early. Using the findings of this article as a starting point could improve our understanding of their labor-related needs.

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### **Notes**

1. To our knowledge, there are no general or European definitions of precarious workers. There are, however, several definitions of precarious workers that are based on empirical or normative standards. There are, for several reasons (Frade et al., 2004), cross-national differences in the meaning of precarious employment (Frade et al., 2004; Rodgers & Rodgers, 1989).
2. The “working class” is a term that has dominated the sociological debate on labor (see, for example, Wright, 2002). This classification has become too ambiguous—if it has ever been unambiguous—to describe labor-related classes nowadays. The ambiguity can be attributed to the fading of categories in which people are less likely to be attributed to one of the existing classes.
3. An unbalanced labor contract is a contract in which the power is not equally distributed; in the worst case, it is a destructive contract.
4. Unemployment is a state that many of the precarious workers enter and leave during their working lives.

5. The basic human needs are comparable to fundamental human rights.
6. For a detailed description, see Standing (2011, p. 10).
7. Because social security and labor market systems are complex, we only give a brief overview of the most recent changes and changes that have a high impact on the existence of the precariat.
8. Performing paid labor according to one's ability.
9. See OECD Employment Outlook 2014 at <http://www.oecd.org/netherlands/EMO-NLD-EN.pdf>
10. The respondents tended to lump together politics, politicians, government, and governmental agencies. During the focus groups, we mostly talked about the local government since the respondents have to deal with several local government agencies.
11. In some industries, workers do not get paid for short periods of illness.

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