

A Quest for Passion: Understanding Precarious Migration of Young Highly Qualified EU Citizens as Lived Neoliberal Subjectivity

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Abstract

In critical social research the concept of employability is associated with the neoliberal imperative that every individual should become a self-responsible, self-improving and enterprising subject in the increasingly precarious labour markets. Despite the prominence of employability in policies governing young people's intra-European migration, few studies examine migrants' subjectivities in this context. Building on narrative data, this article adds to our understanding on how neoliberal subject formations function as an instrument for governing young EU migrants' lives in conditions of precarious labour. Central to this understanding, it develops the concept of passion to depict young migrants' quest for obtaining work with opportunities for self-development and self-realisation. This concept contributes to the study of highly qualified intra-EU migration by allowing critical analysis of meanings given to mobility in relation to work; by highlighting dynamics of (self-)precarisation in this context; and by advancing debates on social-structural inequality among EU migrants pursuing their quest for passion.

Keywords

employability, highly qualified migrants, inequality, intra-European migration, neoliberal subjectivity, passion, precarious labour, self-precarisation, self-responsibility, youth

Introduction

The European Union (EU) has a long-standing objective to encourage educated young people to enhance their professional careers through opportunities for intra-EU mobility, such as student exchange programmes, internships, volunteering and working abroad. Its

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institutional discourse perceives mobility as central to young people's employability, though it mainly targets the highly qualified (Courtois, 2020; Nikunen, 2017). Indeed, the EU free movement framework has supported inflows of qualified young workers to major European cities, the labour markets of which are expected to offer internship and job opportunities carrying a particularly employability-enhancing value. Nevertheless, the benefits of free mobility are not distributed equally. Instead of functioning as a stepping-stone, migration may also lead to labour market entrapment, especially for younger workers who are disproportionately exposed to unemployment and precarious labour conditions both as young persons and as migrants (O'Reilly et al., 2019). Employability can therefore be a treacherous concept that does not necessarily redeem the optimistic promise of employment it entails (Leonardi and Chertkovskaya, 2017).

In critical social research the concept of employability has been associated with the hegemonic neoliberal imperative that every individual should be or become, in Foucault's (2008) terms, an enterprising subject, continuously working to improve the self as means of achieving a life defined by 'fulfillment, excellence and achievement' (Leonardi and Chertkovskaya, 2017; Paju et al., 2020; Rose, 1998: 154). Studies from distinct contexts of transnational youth migration have subsequently explored how young people's contemporary desire to become 'international' is both constituted and being triggered by this hegemonic discourse of self-developing subjectivity (Haverig, 2011; Yoon, 2014). However, despite the prominence of employability in the EU mobility policies, few studies (Courtois, 2020) have analysed migrants' subjectivities in this context.

This article draws on literature applying Foucault's (2008) concept of governmentality to examine how such neoliberal subjectivities are constituted and lived out by highly qualified young workers in the context of EU migration and with what implications. The article builds empirically on interviews and writings of young adults from southern Europe and Nordic countries who experienced unemployment and precarious types of work after moving to Brussels. Along with the affirmative policies encouraging their mobility, their precarious labour position also exposed them to different sets of policies with a workfarist orientation, governing them into subjects self-responsible for managing their employability and the risks they confront in the labour markets (see McDonald and Marston, 2005).

The article proposes a novel conceptual approach for the study of intra-European migration (e.g. Bygnes, 2015; Varriale, 2019) by analysing their migration as lived neoliberal subjectivity (Scharff, 2016). Its purpose is to add to our understanding on how neoliberal subject formation functions as an instrument for governing highly qualified young EU migrants' lives in precarious labour markets. Central to this understanding, the article applies and develops the concept of passion to depict young migrants' quest for obtaining work that offers opportunities for self-realisation, self-development and self-fulfilment, rather than economic gain or social mobility (Farrugia, 2019). While such identification of the self with one's work is claimed to be characteristic of neoliberal subjectivity, it is also said to make workers adaptable to the requirements of precarious labour markets and to encourage practices of self-precarisation, particularly among creative and knowledge workers (Armano et al., 2017; Lorey, 2006; Vallas and Christin, 2018). The article argues that applying and advancing these theoretical and conceptual

insights can contribute to the study of highly qualified intra-EU migration in important ways.

The following sections outline the theoretical framing of intra-EU migration as lived neoliberal subjectivity, discussing particularly the normalising functions of the employability discourse. The concept of passion is then introduced, proposing that it can improve our understanding of young EU migrants' mobility, especially in precarious labour conditions. Next, the research context, data and methods are presented. The empirical analysis shows how viewing work as realisation of passionate investments crucially defines the migration of the study's young participants who perceived mobility as an instrument, or even the prerequisite, to achieving work corresponding to their passion and, thus, a meaningful life. At the same time, the analysis also demonstrates how their precarious labour conditions, coupled with different sets of workfarist policies, critically – but differentially – condition their ability to enact neoliberal subjectivity in real life. The concluding section discusses the overtures the chosen conceptual framework offers for future research.

Employability, Mobility and Lived Neoliberal Subjectivity

The way in which the discourse of employability has informed policies since the 1980s is closely linked to the processes on neoliberalisation under which it is positioned as a condition for work, welfare (Leonardi and Chertkovskaya, 2017) and, more recently, internationalisation and transnational mobility (Bamberger et al., 2019; Nikunen, 2017; Yoon, 2014). Referring to an individual's ability to attain employment and transit between jobs, the concept of employability implies a shared understanding of individuals' need to cultivate their own human capital and, in this way, to be or become autonomous, self-responsible, self-improving and self-enterprising agents in 'flexible' labour markets (Paju et al., 2020). Bradley and Devadason (2008) show how the associated rhetoric of adaptability and requirement for 'lifelong learning' are internalised by young people exposed to labour market insecurity (also Kelly, 2006). As educational credentials alone are no longer considered sufficient to render individuals employable (Leonard et al., 2016), international experiences are viewed as increasingly central in constituting employability and a lack thereof as a risk in the global and local competition for jobs (Courtois, 2020; Yoon, 2014). At the same time, turning internationalisation into a meritocratic race in the name of neoliberal competitiveness downplays inequalities embedded in the structures and systems that condition transnational mobility globally (Bamberger et al., 2019).

This article considers young people's intra-EU migration in the light of literature investigating the ways in which individual subjectivities are constituted under neoliberalism, and how such neoliberal subjectivities are lived out (e.g. Kelly, 2006; Paju et al., 2020; Rose, 1999; Scharff, 2016). From a governmentality perspective, intra-EU mobility policies and discourses appear as mechanisms of power that function through augmenting opportunities and choices for young people while, in parallel, encouraging forms of self-developing subjectivity (Foucault, 2008; Rose, 1998). Nikunen (2017) shows how national and EU-level policies are predicated on the belief that intra-EU

mobility will enhance young people's employability, while primarily promoting this ideal to highly qualified middle-class youth.

Meanwhile, empirical adaptation of Foucault's work in other (non-EU) migratory contexts shows how young people themselves conceive their transnational mobility as a process of self-development to not only gain advantage in competitive and flexible labour markets to achieve social mobility but also as a project of recreating oneself as a neoliberal subject, imagined as freely and individually pursuing their chosen life courses while seeking one's 'true self' (Haverig, 2011; Yoon, 2014). EU mobility policies and discourses accommodate both of these expressions of neoliberal subjectivity enabled by the free movement regime. However, while voluntary geographical mobility becomes normalised as an integral component of contemporary youth transitions to 'adulthood', the precarious labour conditions may delay and desynchronise these transitions (Varriale, 2019). Therefore, despite the mobility policies and discourses seeming neutral, promising equality and fulfillment for all, the future visions offered can be unrealistically optimistic even for some of the ostensibly most advantaged migrants, as the previously strong link between higher education and secure career pathways dissolves (Berlant, 2011; Nikunen, 2017: 664).

Workfarism and the Making of Self-Responsible Subjects

Understanding the implications of neoliberal subject formation on the lives of young EU migrants in precarious labour conditions requires us to also take into account the policies through which they are governed as workers and citizens. As Rose (1999: 46) notes, the subjects imagined as autonomous, choice-making and free, coexist with other forms of subjectivity, including the worker-citizen subject of rights and obligations. Although in different ways and to varying degrees, most EU countries implement welfare policies with a workfarist orientation, that render entitlements increasingly conditional on contributions made through waged-work (Greer, 2016; O'Reilly et al., 2019). As another deeply neoliberal construct, workfarism stresses individuals' responsibility in managing the social and economic risks they confront in the labour market through embracing flexibility and actively working on their employability (McDonald and Marston, 2005). It also includes the conception of accountability that legitimises increased conditionality and penalties for non-compliance (Morris, 2019). Young people in particular are expected to show flexibility and willingness to improve their employability while trained to regard themselves as enterprises (Paju et al., 2020). As far as individuals accept these obligations and responsibility for their own welfare, they are an integral part of the neoliberal subject formation (McDonald and Marston, 2005; Rose, 1999).

Young EU migrants may become subject to workfarist welfare policies both in their countries of origin and destination (Simola and Wrede, 2020). Additionally, the national-level governance of free movement in its current form can further serve to induce self-responsibility, especially on those in precarious positions. Several EU countries have established policies to limit the mobility of certain EU migrants and the practices put in place have a clear workfarist edge. Making use of the conditionality defining the key legal categories of 'worker' and 'jobseeker' under EU legislation, countries interpret these conditions restrictively seeking to reserve the right to residence and/or welfare primarily to those who are able to demonstrate self-sufficiency, stable employment or

‘genuine’ employability. These policies interact with workfarist welfare policies, reinforcing employers’ power over young EU migrants in precarious positions (Simola and Wrede, 2020). Meanwhile, the associated popular and political discourses, depicting EU migrants as benefit abusers, further reinforce the ideal of self-responsible subjects who are expected to take care of themselves or be deemed undeserving of the rights of EU citizenship (Lafleur and Mescoli, 2018).

Developing the Concept of Passion for the Study of Highly Qualified EU Migration

Vallas and Christin (2018) call for more empirical investigation into how neoliberal policies foster a form of worker subjectivity that aligns with the needs of the precarious economy by compelling and coercing workers to become autonomous and self-sufficient entrepreneurs. This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of these dynamics in relation to qualified intra-EU migration. In doing so it suggests that adding passion into our conceptual toolbox can guide us to a more critically engaged and nuanced analysis.

Young Europeans who opt for migration can be expected to be more work and achievement oriented compared to those who do not (King et al., 2016: 6). Meanwhile, Farrugia (2019) claims that, rather than by economic gain or social mobility, contemporary middle-class workers tend to be driven by their passionate attachment to work, imagined as unique to every individual and expressed not only in relation to labour, but across the person’s life as a whole (also Lorey, 2006). Young people in particular are encouraged to view their work and ‘career’ as the basis for a meaningful sense of self, requiring passionate investments and commitment (Farrugia, 2020). Following this line of argument, we can assume that passion – understood as committed self-identification with one’s chosen work/career – also plays a role in the migration of highly qualified young EU citizens.

This article suggests that analysing young migrants’ subjectivities and the meanings they attach to work is essential when migration takes place under precarious labour market conditions. Armano and Murgia (2013) demonstrate how the identification of the self with one’s work, while valuing one’s passions and desires, may become a source of self-exploitation or self-precarisation that Lorey (2006) claims to have become a normal way of living and working in neoliberal societies. It induces workers to tolerate precarious labour conditions, such as insecure, irregular and temporary contractual arrangements, low salaries and demands for unpaid labour, as if they were inherently self-chosen (Lorey, 2006; Papadopoulos et al., 2008: 222–235). According to Lorey (2006) subjects become easily exploitable precisely because of the belief that precarious living and working conditions are the prerequisites for their freedom, self-improvement and self-realisation. This article argues that it is critical to investigate the implications of such practices in fashioning young EU citizens’ autonomy and choices regarding work and migration, while taking account of the variegated social positionings from which they enact neoliberal subjectivities in this context.

Context and Data

Brussels constitutes an illuminating context for studying young EU citizens’ labour migration. It stands out with its job market formed around the EU institutions, including

a range of international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), media and businesses, as well as a lively creative sector, making it an attractive destination for qualified workers from all around Europe. Its attractiveness also produces intense competition for qualified jobs, especially junior positions. Precarious employment practices are common both at the top and bottom ends of Brussels' labour market, including the exploitation of internships as a source of free or very cheap qualified labour.

The empirical sample consists of 27 young adults (21–34 years old) from Italy (10), Spain (eight), Finland (seven) and Denmark (two), who partook in face-to-face interviews in 2014–2015 and were asked to respond to further questions in writing in 2018. All the participants had university studies at Master's or Doctoral level and their educational backgrounds represent a range of academic fields.¹ To maximise the study's capacity to capture the effects of labour market precarity for mobility, it focuses on the experiences of persons who moved to Brussels with an intention to work, but experienced unemployment and worked under precarious arrangements at some point during their stay (see Vallas and Christin, 2018). At the time of the interviews, the majority of the participants were either unemployed or precariously employed. Five participants were describing retrospective experiences of precarity after having reached a more stable employment position. The participants were mostly recruited through social media, in addition to snowball sampling. The majority were in their late 20s or early 30s at the time of migration (only two were under 25), reflecting the increasing insecurity confronted today also by 'older' young adults (Bradley and Devadason, 2008). The sample contains 16 women and 11 men; however, gendered differences are not pronounced in the data.

By including participants from the strongly distinct welfare state and labour market environments of southern Europe and Nordic countries, the study seeks to clarify the role of these environments in conditioning their experiences. Specifically, while in the Nordic countries precarious employment is still relatively uncommon by European standards, the Italian and Spanish labour markets have been described as deeply precarious for young workers (Bygnes, 2015). Moreover, in the southern welfare models, precarious young workers are frequently excluded from independent social protection for not having contributed sufficiently. In the Nordic countries, despite the spread of workfarist ideology within this region too, the states are still trusted to be responsible for the welfare of all adult citizens. (O'Reilly et al., 2019.)

The participants' labour market trajectories during mobility varied considerably. It was common that, instead of real employment, they were offered paid or unpaid internships, sometimes followed by further internships without guarantees of regularisation. For those who attained formal employment, the temporary contracts typically alternated with periods of unemployment. Some were self-employed, sometimes because freelance work was the norm in their fields (e.g. journalism), and others because their employer insisted that the work be performed under a self-employment arrangement. A few participants had semi-voluntarily chosen self-employment in the absence of better alternatives and tried to make ends meet with small, diversified sources of income. Several participants worked through temporary staffing agencies with weekly renewable contracts. Additionally, many of the participants had undertaken work without written contracts.

Belgium is among the EU countries that have adopted an increasingly workfarist approach to condition the rights of foreign EU citizens. Along with other restrictions to

their welfare access, their right to reside in Belgium under the status of ‘worker’ is made conditional on having an employment contract complying with labour law in terms of minimum thresholds for remuneration and hours, which usually excludes interns and volunteers (O’Brien et al., 2016: 83). Since 2011, Belgium has also imposed ‘orders to leave the territory’ for EU citizens who do not, or no longer, meet the residence conditions, or who have made claims for social entitlements and are considered to put an ‘unreasonable burden’ on its welfare system (Lafleur and Mescoli, 2018).

While for many participants the limbo of unemployment, temporary jobs and internships went on for years, they often struggled to find money for rent, bills and medical costs, as well as for language classes, the administrative recognition of degrees and other employability-related activities. Those who made claims for unemployment benefits often saw their claims rejected, because their work histories were composed of temporary/irregular arrangements, possibly gathered in countries other than Belgium (for a more detailed analysis of the interplay of general welfare conditionality and specific conditions imposed on EU migrants, see Simola and Wrede, 2020). Furthermore, some of the participants who sought to register as residents at the municipal administration were not granted residence certificates because their work experience was not considered to render them ‘workers’. They were granted only a temporary stay of three to six months while also required to provide evidence of active job-searching (see Simola, 2018). In these procedures, claims made for social entitlements could also lead to residence rights being withdrawn (see Lafleur and Mescoli, 2018).

Methods

The one-time interviews were conducted by the author in Brussels with the exception of two interviews, one of which was carried out in Finland and the other via Skype with an Italian residing in South-East Asia. The interviews lasted from one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours. They were organised in two sections. The first used the participants’ resumes as interview material to elicit free but comprehensive narratives regarding their work and migration experiences. The second section was semi-structured: the participants were asked to describe their experiences of working life and unemployment before and after moving to Belgium, their experiences with local bureaucracies, their awareness of their rights, the problems they faced in obtaining recognition of their rights, their financial subsistence and their future plans and prospects. The follow-up questions sent to the participants by email concerned their work and migration trajectories in the three years following the interview, as well as their retrospective views of the impact of their experiences in Brussels on their lives. However, this second dataset is limited as only half of the participants responded.

The fact that the researcher herself was an EU migrant of similar age living in Brussels often created a rather coequal relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. The participants were informed about the confidentiality and data protection policy before and during the interview. Although the interviews covered sensitive topics, a good rapport was established in most cases. The communication with the participants was conducted in Spanish, Finnish and English, which may have hindered the expression of

some Danish and Italian participants. The analysis was conducted in the original languages and the interview extracts were translated only when reporting the findings.

The analytical framework was developed moving iteratively back and forth between data and theory. In this process, provisional observations while coding the overall data draw attention to the participants' accounts regarding their choices related to migration and work in conditions of precarious labour markets. These observations created an interest in existing theories of neoliberal subjectivity and the place of passion in empirical analyses on precarity. The following analysis is informed by these insights as it focuses on the meanings the participants attach to mobility in relation to work, the subjectivities they enact in these accounts and the ways in which these subjectivities align with the requirements of precarious labour. Drawing on Farrugia's (2019) ideal-typical notion of 'subjects of passion', the concept of passion is used to capture the extent to and the ways in which the participants view migration as a means for achieving work that allows for the development and realisation of meaningful subjectivity. The aim is to understand how the participants' autonomy, choices and meanings given to these choices are governed under hegemonic neoliberalism and also to examine the influence of the related policy frameworks and legal-institutional arrangements. Attention is paid to issues of money in order to ground the analysis on the actual opportunities and constraints to enact mobile, neoliberal subjectivity. Pseudonyms are used to ensure the participants' anonymity.

Mobility as a Quest for Passion

The EU free movement regime does in fact offer in global terms unparalleled opportunities for internationalisation for young EU citizens who can relatively effortlessly initiate migration and access labour markets in other EU countries without having to apply for visas or work permits. However, as Haverig (2011: 107) points out, while young people may imagine themselves as freely pursuing their own interest regarding migration, they do so within a field of inter-state regulations, institutional arrangements and political-economic realities. Their freedom to make choices and give meaning to these choices is thus bound by structures and discourses that both enable and limit their autonomy (Rose, 1999).

Most of the participants had at some point in their life taken part in national or EU mobility programmes, including Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci, Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs and European Voluntary Service (EVS), which, many of them explained, had encouraged and facilitated their decisions to search for work abroad. The majority had initially arrived in Brussels either for an internship or through the Erasmus programme, which had offered them both an institutional framework and financial support for initiating migration. Arguably, these programmes have also normalised, among young qualified Europeans, the practice of intra-EU mobility, which has become central to their ideals of successful labour market transitions (Courtois, 2020; Varriale, 2019). For the great majority of the participants, enhancing their employability and, undoubtedly, finding employment, were clear key drivers of migration. However, analysing their narratives through the concept of passion helps to paint a more nuanced picture of the

different meanings and expectations they attached to their mobility in relation to the type of work opportunities they sought.

The participants typically explained their decision to move to Brussels as connected to their personal passion to pursue a certain type of work or work in a specific environment. For some the passion was to work in a particular professional field (e.g. human rights). For many others working in an international environment was a passion in its own right. Like Danish Eva noted: '[L]iving abroad and working abroad is one of my dreams.' Several participants had also obtained their Masters' degrees in fields such as international/EU business, law, politics or journalism, and consequently perceived their chances of finding work corresponding to their education to be best in a city like Brussels. For a few participants the migration had meant taking a genuine leap of faith as they had left behind permanent work positions and invested their savings in new qualifications and skills through obtaining additional diplomas or, for example, doing an internship for an EU institution. Spanish Carlos explained:

[W]hen I lived in [Spain] they offered me a permanent contract, for life, as a teacher, but I said no, because I want to be a journalist and live in Brussels. And, in fact, the money I saved while working as a teacher in Spain I invested to live here and to do a Master [in international journalism].

Even those who had come to Brussels following their partners all shared the objective of pursuing their chosen work. With very few exceptions, the participants did not mention earning money as an objective in this context.

Notably, the Nordic participants typically perceived the lack of 'international experience' as a labour market disadvantage and mobility as a means to develop employability. For some, 'internationalisation' was an objective as such. As Finnish Riina retrospectively noted: 'I felt the need to build my own international experience, since I had not, at any point of my studies, done an internship or lived abroad, or done anything of the sort and I missed such experience.' Crucially, however, for most of the Nordics mobility appeared as a choice that could be reversed, even when they had originally envisioned their migration to be long-term. The experiences gained during mobility were presumed to foster employability in their domestic labour markets, where good opportunities for qualified workers were generally expected to exist.

By contrast, the majority of the Spanish and Italian participants had not seen in their countries of origin the chance to find employment corresponding to their education and, most importantly, offering opportunities for self-realisation. For most of them, mobility was also an attempt to escape the extremely precarious working conditions prevalent in the labour markets in these countries (Bygnes, 2015). Migration thus appeared to them as an ambivalent 'choice', defined by the absence of opportunities in their home country. Nicola, for instance, explained that his desire to leave Italy was connected to what he perceived as 'complete lack of appreciation for young talents' who are treated 'as slaves' by Italian employers. Through migration, he searched for opportunities to do what he 'really wanted to do' and build an international career that would allow him to exploit all his skills and abilities.

In sum, there was a difference in the way in which participants from the Nordic and the southern European countries perceived the role of mobility in their quest for passion, reflecting the labour market conditions in their respective countries of origin. Remarkably, many of the Italian and Spanish participants considered migration as the prerequisite of ever finding work corresponding to their passion, for which reason mobility often was for them the only option, closer to a compulsion than a genuine choice.

The Quest for Passion as a Source of (Self-)Precarisation

The meanings that mobility was given in their quest for passion further influenced the extent to which migration became a driver of precarisation in the participants' lives. Alicia, from Spain, explained how she had decided to stay in Brussels for over two years, although she had not been able to find paid, professional work after the initial internship that had brought her there. She sought professional experience through further internships while also investing a major part of her time into a self-initiated voluntary project in the area she considered her 'vocation'. In the interview she justified this decision to remain in Brussels as her 'only option' despite the harsh conditions she had encountered there:

My grandfather said: 'why don't you come to Spain now that they are opening competitions for positions in public administration? . . . You get a stable and permanent position.' I told him: 'yes grandpa, but no. I'm not going to work in the post or do whatever work in the administration.' So my only option is to stay [in Brussels]. . . . It's my great and amazing option, but I need to start from the bottom, it must be done . . . It's what I decided to do, and in what I'm good at, humanities, journalism and writing. . . . I need to keep on working to find a way . . . to live from these things.

Scharff (2016) shows how entrepreneurial subjects tend to assume their responsibility for managing opportunities and constraints, embracing risk and hiding injuries related to work. In line with this argument, many participants from different origins expressed conformity with the flexible, entrepreneurial attitude required in the precarious labour market environment, although they all were critical about the prevalence of the precarious conditions as such. This also served to maintain their optimism that their tolerance of precarity would ultimately be rewarded (Berlant, 2011; Bradley and Devadason, 2008). To illustrate, Alessandra, from Italy, had first arrived in Brussels for an internship but afterwards could not find professional work nor even another internship. She made her living as a waitress while continuously searching for 'more useful' work opportunities. After a couple of months, she decided to move again and used her savings to accept a volunteer position in the UK:

I thought, okay, I'm not going anywhere . . . doing a job I'm not interested in doing. I prefer to move to the UK for [an] EVS [European Voluntary Service] . . . I thought I need to improve my English . . . I thought I want something where I can be challenged more or to do something more useful for myself.

At the time of the interview via Skype, Alessandra was doing yet another EVS assignment in South-East Asia. When re-contacted three years later, these voluntary experiences had helped her to obtain two professional, short-term jobs, but she was uncertain about her immediate future:

I am very happy and satisfied with my current job and life situation, although it is still precarious, and I am not able to predict if and where I will work in five months from now. I might, or might not, be asked to continue to collaborate with my team, but I will only be informed at the end of my current contract. In the meantime, I am evaluating other options, including finding a job in other countries (in Europe or overseas), or pursuing higher education. Lately I have been doing other interviews, both for jobs and PhDs, but I did not succeed in any of them so far. The competition is really tough, and I experienced that in Brussels. For the time being, I am not considering moving back to Italy, because I fear I won't have many professional opportunities in the field I am interested in.

Alessandra thus accepted the precariousness and the requirement for extreme flexibility in terms of geographical location of work (see Courtois, 2020) that she perceived as the prerequisites to eventually achieving self-fulfilling work.

The Nordic participants were also often prepared to accept a high level of flexibility and precarity, as long as the work experience gained was perceived as valuable to them in pursuing their chosen work. The narrative of Saara, a Finn, shows how the passionate regard for an international career itself had compelled her to comply with detrimental working conditions, even at the expense of her own health (see Papadopoulos et al., 2008: 222–235). Saara had left her permanent job in Finland to follow her dream of an international career: 'I came for an internship . . . and from day one I felt like "wow, I really want to live here, what a great city".' Saara found a job in a local firm right away, but was dismissed after a couple of months. She started looking for a new job 'in panic' and eventually found a new placement over half a year later. However, in the new organisation she was again in an insecure position that did not even allow time for recovery after she fell ill with cancer. She explained how she felt coerced to hide her illness to have her contract renewed:

I worked there for two years . . . but all the time it was like 'we can kick you out if you don't perform' . . . and sometimes I worked 12–14 hours per day. . . . And the last spring I had to be operated on [for a cancer]. I was out of the office for four days and the rest of the spring I worked with a bleeding [wound]. I even had some complications . . . but [my boss asked me]: 'Can you keep this project or not?' And I thought, if that's what it takes, I will keep it . . . But then at the end of the summer I had a [burnout] . . . [And the doctor said] 'you cannot go back to work'. And I said that 'I have to go, I want them to renew my contract!'

While on leave following her burnout, Saara applied and was accepted for a new job in Finland. However, although this led to a tremendous improvement in her working conditions, she described her return as a temporary 'labour migration', purely to gather work experience to be able to leave again.

As these narratives illustrate, when mobility was perceived as a quest for passion, it could lead to practices of self-precarisation connected with the desire for work associated with a meaningful life, as well as adaptation to the structural conditions and hegemonic expectations perceived as normal (Lorey, 2006). To be sure, there were dissenting voices. For instance, many expressed awareness of the poor chances of internships functioning as stepping-stones to real employment. Like Alicia who, while dedicated to her professional project, was also critical about the uncertain limbo she had been left in:

[T]hey tell us that we need to jump through the hoops and we jump through the hoops. I'm doing things because I'm told these things are beneficial for me, because that's what you need to do . . . but what they are telling you to do is not even guaranteeing you a future these days.

Such criticism, however, was not easily translated into dissenting behaviour. Particularly many of the southern Europeans conceived precarity as an inevitable condition, the only putative alternative being to renounce their passion. Though for most of them moving to Brussels had been an attempt to escape precarity, this intention was thwarted after also facing precarious conditions in Belgium. This disillusionment often served to reinforce their fear of failure and falling out. According to Lorey (2006), precisely such overarching and normalised precariousness and loss of certainties is what makes dropping out of hegemonic paradigms so difficult (also Papadopoulos et al., 2008).

Imposed Self-Responsibility and Uneven Opportunities to Pursue One's Passion

This final section examines how the workfarist policies regulating the participants' access to social protection and legal residence conditioned their ability to pursue their passion in Brussels and beyond. The data show how, by depicting the poor and precariously employed EU migrants as undeserving of the rights of EU citizenship in public debates, policy and administrative practice (Lafleur and Mescoli, 2018), the Belgian state managed to persuade and/or coerce many of the participants into subjects responsible for their own survival. While some had applied and been denied social protection, sometimes followed by an 'order to leave the territory', for many others the mere awareness of these policies made them renounce any possible rights they might have had as EU citizens by not registering their residence and not making claims for entitlements (see Simola, 2018). While most of them were critical about these policies, they saw little room for contesting them, especially as they were constrained by money and time. They thus often acquiesced to the lack of support, like Luca, an Italian sociologist who worked as a bicycle courier:

Since I didn't find a proper job, I didn't register so far . . . I want to contribute somehow and, then, if I am in a position to apply for unemployment benefit I will do [it] . . . It's going to be hard to make my dreams come true in this working environment and system. I feel that I have to fight and struggle and to achieve my goals by myself.

Importantly, although these policies affected participants of all origins, critical differences appeared between the Nordics and the southern Europeans reflecting the distinct ways in which young workers are positioned within the welfare systems and labour markets in these countries. While excluded from social protection in Belgium, some of the Nordics were able to draw money from their domestic welfare systems in a way that allowed them to continue developing their employability and searching for better jobs in Belgium (see Simola and Wrede, 2020). Even more crucially, while returning to their home country was not perceived as a career dead-end, many of the Nordics considered this as an option, were the conditions in Brussels to turn overly harsh. For example,

Riina, who was unable to find a new professional position, left Belgium for Finland soon after her temporary contract was not extended: 'I decided that, oh well, I can't be bothered to struggle here; I will just go home now.' Consequently, none of the Nordic participants conceded to undertake work in Brussels that was completely irrelevant to their professional goals.

In contrast, for the southern European participants the flexibility and adaptability in the form of precarious contractual arrangements, combined with low or no salaries, often turned out to be – as an actual lived reality – incompatible with the imperatives of self-responsibility and self-development. In the absence of social protection, the complete lack of revenue forced many of them to consider returning to their parental home. However, the majority rejected this option, as it was associated with relinquishing their passion. While in many cases the participants' parents were not able to offer sufficient financial support for their children's quest for passion, the reluctance to return increased the pressure on them to accept low-skilled and precarious jobs for money and legal security. This way, however, the lack of money translated into less time to invest in employability-enhancing activities as well as further time lost to recover from work.

Antonio, from Italy, had not registered his residency and was relying on a minimal subsistence from occasional freelance assignments as a graphic designer, mostly informally, while keenly searching for work. Meanwhile, he was also involved in considerable amounts of voluntary work to maintain and develop his skills. With his legal and economic insecurity becoming unbearable, he was forced to consider finding 'any kind of job'. However, Antonio was worried that this would impede him from volunteering, which he saw as the only avenue for eventually finding employment in his chosen field:

I'm not earning enough to be able to build a real life . . . [And] you cannot see how you can actually interact with this situation and make it change. I mean, yes, there is a way [that] would be to start doing whatever I can do . . . any kind of job. And I'm about to do that but . . . this will not leave me enough time to do the [unpaid] stuff, and at the moment it's the only way I can actually manage to do what I like to do. And doing what I like to do is the only way I can actually get to do it at some point, being paid.

Antonio's concern was substantiated by the story of Paula, a Spaniard, explaining how she undertook several parallel jobs to survive, while also searching for jobs and trying to be active in voluntary work:

It's not on my [resume] but last year I was enslaved in a restaurant. I worked almost 12 hours a day and I was also working in [a supermarket]. . . . Thinking and hoping that I would find work easily, I had allowed debt to accumulate. Uff. . . . And to be able to get rid of it, I had to throw myself to the restaurants headlong . . . I was a total wreck.

While no clear time for rest existed, the fear and experiences of exhaustion urged some to consider returning 'home' against their will. Paula described her situation like this: 'The option of returning home I have only considered in moments when I've been in a bad state, psychologically. Only in moments when I thought: "I give up" and "I need to rest", because I cannot take it anymore.'

Some were also forced to return. Alicia, whose professional vocation was already described above, was combining unpaid professional work with parallel ‘bread-and-butter’ jobs. These jobs, she said, did not leave her with enough time for physical and mental recovery, while also blocking her opportunities to invest in her vocation:

I don’t have money to live next month or the one after . . . Or [I need to do work] that takes away my time and energy and has no prospects, only to continue [living] here . . . I’ve decided I will return [to Spain] at the end of the month . . . because I need to rest . . . I want to invest in my vocation but here I can’t because I’m always depending on the money and on time and I have neither.

All in all, the participants from different national and social origins appear to be exposed to personal responsibility and precarity in both similar and unequal ways. Migration in conditions of precarious labour appears as an insecure endeavour for everyone. The analysis, however, demonstrates that the risks and opportunities of migration are unevenly distributed under the workfarist regimes, resulting in differential chances to live up to the standards of neoliberal subjectivity in real life.

Conclusions

As Rose (1999) suggests, freedom can function as a resource for governing passions of individuals imagined as autonomous, free and freely choosing. The analysis approaching the practice of intra-EU migration from the perspective of neoliberal governmentality shows how the EU policies targeting young middle-class Europeans normalise mobility as central to self-developing subjectivity. Conceptualising EU migration as lived neoliberal subjectivity clarifies the ambivalence of autonomy and compulsion in the context of this ostensibly privileged and ‘free’ mobility.

The article proposes that adding the concept of passion into our analytical toolbox contributes to the study of highly qualified intra-EU migration in at least three important ways, thus opening perspectives for future critical research. First, applying this concept allows analysis of different meanings given to mobility in relation to work. In fact, in accordance with Farrugia’s (2019) claim that today, a middle-class working self is not merely articulated in terms of achievement, expected economic gains or social mobility, rather as the realisation of passionate investments across a person’s life as a whole, the participants very often emphasised how unrelated their motivations regarding work and migration were to money. Theorising their mobility as a quest for passion diversifies and contests the dominant conception of intra-EU labour migration being driven chiefly by economic motivations and the search for achievement articulated in terms of social mobility (see Bygnes, 2015; see Varriale, 2019).

Second, applying the existing literature on the relationship between passion and precarity (Armano and Murgia, 2013; Lorey, 2006) adds to our understanding of the complex drivers of precarisation in the context of young people’s intra-EU mobility. By encouraging forms of self-developing subjectivity, the regime invites young workers to tolerate precarious labour conditions and demands for unpaid labour as ‘normal’ and inherently self-chosen, which can lead to practices of self-precarisation with

sometimes-detrimental implications. The analysis shows that when mobility is perceived as a quest for passion, young migrants may be compelled to bear even injurious working and living conditions.

Finally, grounding the analysis with a focus on material conditions of migration makes clear that money is not without relevance even for workers who move in search of self-fulfilling work. While discussions of social inequality have been largely absent from the study of intra-EU migration (Varriale, 2019), the article questions the view that neo-liberal subjectivities would be lived out in the same way regardless of an individual's social-structural position. The analysis takes into account the differential ways in which diverse workfarist policies applied in different EU countries render young EU migrants into subjects responsible for their welfare, also limiting their freedom of movement and hindering them from enacting such modes of entrepreneurial subjectivity that the EU mobility policies encourage. This way it also grasps the uneven ways in which young EU migrants are exposed to precarious labour markets with the subsequent impact on their ability to pursue their quest for passion.

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