

## ARTICLE

# A social-psychological examination of academic precarity as an organizational practice and subjective experience

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## Abstract

Research and teaching conditions have, particularly for those who are junior or from disadvantaged backgrounds, deteriorated considerably over the years in the higher education sector. Unequal opportunities in access and advancement in careers have led to increasing levels of precarity in the higher education sector. Although the concept of precarity has been grasped in many other disciplines, the social-psychological understanding of this concept remains unexplored. In this paper, we aim to develop a social-psychological understanding of precarity to examine how identity dynamics and inter-group relations, as well as associated organizational controls, reinforce inequality regimes and power structures that create precarious conditions in academia. In doing so, we use social identity theory and system justification theory under an inequality regime framework. We argue that even though change towards equality and equity in academia should be possible, it is difficult to achieve this because of entrenched identity interests by power holders and the perceived legitimacy of the existing system. Therefore, academic precarity should be recognized both as a subjective experience and as an organizational practice to make inequalities more visible and decrease the perceptions of legitimacy—and to eventually achieve a fundamental positive transformation in academia.

## KEYWORDS

academia, inequality, precarity, research, social identity, system justification

Nihan Albayrak-Aydemir and Ilka Helene contributed equally to this work.

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## BACKGROUND

The creation of knowledge and research that tackles the most pressing issues of our time depends on the researchers who do the work. The quality of work produced depends not only on the expertise and skills of those researchers but also on the conditions under which they work. These conditions have deteriorated considerably, particularly for those who are junior, from disadvantaged backgrounds, under international or cultural hegemonies or at the intersections of these characteristics. Thus, unequal opportunities in access and career advancement have created increasing levels of precarity (Bone, 2019; Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017; Coultas, 2022; Giroux, 2015; Holmwood & Marcuello Servos, 2019; Lynch & Ivancheva, 2015; McCarthy et al., 2017; Silva et al., 2022). The aim of this paper is to develop a social-psychological understanding of academic precarity. We will tackle the concept of precarity in a specific organizational context (namely academia) both as an organizational practice and as a subjective experience to better grasp the issues that underlie the (re)production of precarity in academia. We will argue that the academic precarity that bolsters an inequality regime in academia should be recognized and repaired to counteract the reliance on precarious academic positions and practices and to eventually achieve a fundamental positive transformation in academia. We examine how social identity theory and system justification theory can provide meaningful insights into the ways in which we can accomplish this (Figure 1).

We acknowledge and experience inequalities and precarity in society at large (Fine, 2015; Hodgetts et al., 2016; Schmitt et al., 2022; Hakim et al., 2022; Rua et al., 2022) and are conscious of the reflections of societal precarity in different layers of academia. The penetration of all elements of higher education by neoliberalism and neoliberal thinking can be considered one of the most recent and forceful examples of this (Aydin, 2021). Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg (2017) argue that academia is now a place for entrepreneurial faculty where we are self-regulated and self-directed, and eventually, where the self becomes 'human capital'. This notion of entrepreneurship denies histories and experiences of others and commonalities across faculty experiences, which highlights the criticality of organizational responses to precarity that is both derived from the societal conditions at large but also reinforced by organizational practices within a specific context. Therefore, our level of analysis in this paper is the individual within

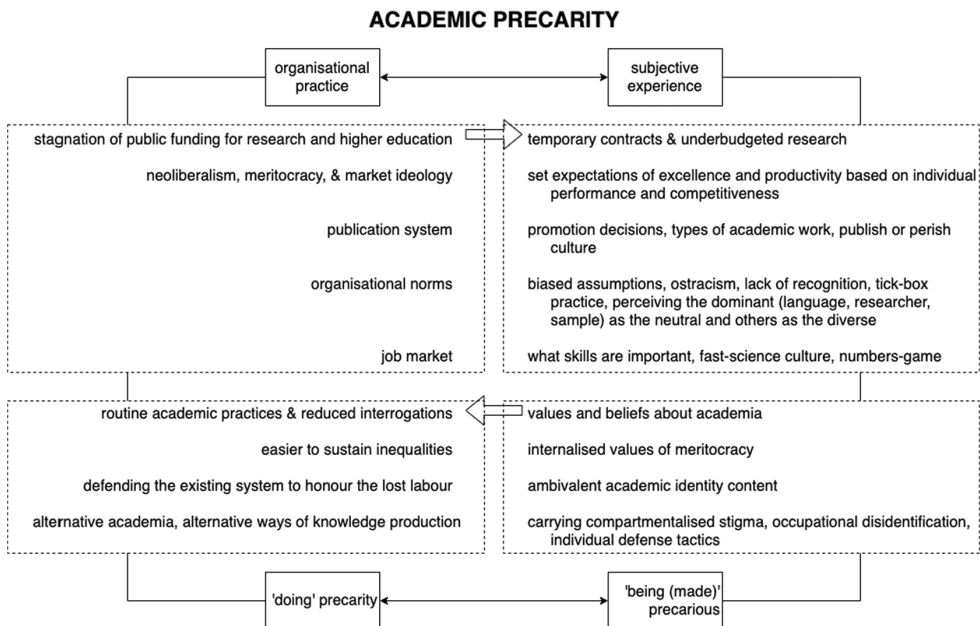


FIGURE 1 Overview of our social-psychological conceptualization of academic precarity.

an organization and the attached organizational inequalities to shed light on the role of organizations in producing precarious conditions. We specifically focus on organizational practices and individuals' interactions with organizational structures. Before starting our analysis, it is important to note that we are ourselves insiders of the group we analyse and our understanding of academic precarity is informed by our own working conditions and positions. Our own experiences in the higher education sector mostly derive from working at universities in the Global North. Likewise, most of the network, collaborations and epistemological stance we developed in academia are based in the Global North. Thus, our conceptualization of academic precarity is founded on our own experiences and perceptions of how academia operates in the Global North—whilst also recognizing that there are still differences within the disciplines and countries that form Global North academia. Although we attempt to develop a social-psychological understanding of academic precarity incorporating both our own conditions and of those from other backgrounds, this should be borne in mind moving forward.

## REDEFINING ACADEMIC PRECARITY

Precarity is an intricate notion that has multifaceted roots and implications and is studied from a plethora of perspectives (e.g., sociological, historical and economical). Yet, the concept of precarity is often defined as an economic category that is characterized by contingent labour relations (Thorkelson, 2016, p. 475) and has been studied in terms of the causes and effects of an economic condition in various contexts. In line with this, precarity in an academic context (i.e., academic precarity) is described as the situation of researchers and academics with a doctoral degree who hold a temporary position without any commitment by their employers to renew their position or transform those positions into long-term or permanent contracts (OECD, O, 2021; Teixeira, 2017). We argue that it is necessary to explore the concept of precarity beyond its economic definition to understand what it means for those who live in precarious conditions but also for those who maintain these precarious conditions.

Precarity in academia is deeply rooted in the long-existing hierarchies of intellectual leadership in academia (Peacock, 2016; Reddy et al., *in review*). Academics who are precarious often have little access to research grants, support mechanisms, networks, leadership roles or other similar conditions that could improve one's career while advancing science. Yet, being a precarious academic is not just about having a temporary contract but also about lacking power by positional differences. For instance, in the United Kingdom, 72% of all full professors are male and only 125 out of 19,285 (0.64%) university professors are Black, of which only 35 (0.18%) are women (AdvanceHE, 2019). Therefore, a Black woman professor could also be precarious in British academia even if she holds a permanent contract because the inequalities and unbalanced power dynamics in academia bolster already-existing societal power differences and creates extra layers of a burden on her (see Settles et al., 2021; Stockfelt, 2018). Moreover, in addition to workers' employment conditions and power position, precarity is connected to people's subjective experience, which highlights a set of effects that are defined by an 'existential state of unpredictability of living without security' (Hundle, 2012, p. 288). Further, geographical differences can be considered an important factor that determines the nature (and experiences) of precarity. For instance, precarity is mostly linked to job quality and market competition in the Global North countries whereas it is mostly a major element of a country's development plans (as opposed to global market competition plans) in the Global South countries (Lee & Kofman, 2012).

In sum, precarity connects the structural issues of labour relations to the subjective experiences of individuals who are (made) precarious (Thorkelson, 2016). It is essential to study the subjective experiences of people working under precarious conditions to understand what it means to be (made) precarious. This requires an examination of precarious conditions and individuals' role in the underpinning of these conditions. Thus, it is also critical to scrutinize how we actively create and recreate precarious conditions by reinforcing a set of practices that are widely used and accepted to maintain the status quo. This active co-creation of academic precarity and our complicity in the creation and maintenance of organizational structures are important. They are related to the observation that we have not seen a major uprising

or collective action for positive change in academia. We argue that many of us have ‘internalized’ the system and are motivated to make it in the system (Adams et al., 2019; Afonso, 2016; Sheehy-Skeffington & Paiwand, 2022). Hence, we might engage organizational regimes that promote a sense of self-managed responsibilities as well as (self-)exploitation (Adams et al., 2019). Moreover, compliance might be driven by pragmatic concerns and ‘dependency by choice’ (Bou Zeineddine et al., 2022, p. 339; Hanafi & Arvanitis, 2014). In this system, success and failure are perceived to be based on a person's merit and the choice to become an academic is based on the hope of future gains and success (Osaldiston et al., 2019). Thus, the socio-cultural expression of neoliberalism also extends to our work life and how we see ourselves as academics and is the backdrop of what we will elaborate in the following sections.

We define academic precarity as a condition that is largely manifested by power relations and inequality among those within a specific organizational context. We adopt an interdisciplinary perspective and argue that the inequality regime framework (Acker, 2006), which explicitly focuses on inequality in organizations, represents an integrative approach to understand the ways in which organizational controls reinforce academic precarity and what this means for scholarly practices that are widely used and accepted in academia. We take a perspective from *within* the field and focus on researchers and academics embedded in a specific, existing system. Importantly, we are interested in inequalities in work organizations because they (such as schools, research institutes etc.) are at the heart of creating inequality in society (Alatas, 2003). We focus on how academics and their common practices are embedded in knowledge production can be fundamental for reproducing inequalities. We aim to address the questions of how academics become or are made precarious and what academic practices underlie and maintain precarious conditions in academia by developing a social-psychological understanding of academic precarity.

## THE FRAMEWORKS OF EXAMINATION: SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY, SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION THEORY AND THE INEQUALITY REGIME FRAMEWORK

There is a growing focus on understanding the consequences of precarious work, which largely focuses on job quality and well-being (Gleibs & Lizama Alvarado, 2019; Kalleberg, 2009; Llosa et al., 2018). However, precarity as a topic has not gained much traction in the (mainstream) social-psychological literature (but see this special issue). Even less has been published in social psychology on the relationship between academic precarity as an analytic category that we study and its scholarly practices as the labour relations we work in. In this paper, we will use social identity theory and system justification theory for developing a social-psychological understanding of precarity to understand the meaning of being a precarious academic as well as the underpinnings of scholarly practices that underscore precarious conditions in academia. There are multiple lenses through which we can understand the phenomenon of academic precarity (see for example, Bou Zeineddine et al., 2022 and Reddy et al., (in review); both papers examine power-based inequities and biases through the lenses of coloniality and critical consciousness). We chose to examine the phenomenon from a relatively ‘mainstream’ social-psychological perspective with the level of analysis being an individual embedded in an organization. Both social identity theory and system justification theory examine individuals in groups and how group processes influence individuals and vice versa. Thus, they are useful tools to understand interactions between organizational practice and subjective experiences and are well-developed for understanding organizational life (Haslam et al., 2003). We will introduce the theoretical perspectives we use and their connections to each other before we move on to the analysis and discussion of academic precarity from a social-psychological perspective.

Social identity theory (SIT) suggests that people develop a social identity based on their group memberships and they strive to maintain a positive image of their groups to protect their self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Thus, social identities can clarify intergroup behaviours based on differences between groups' boundaries, status and recognition (Haslam, 2004). In the context of academia, this will help us to understand how the concept of being an academic—as an important identity and group membership—plays a role in experiencing but also maintaining academic precarity. System justifica-

tion theory (SJT) has been developed to supplement social identity theory (Jost et al., 2004; Rubin & Hewstone, 2004). It suggests that people justify a social system and defend the current status quo even if this system puts them or others in a disadvantaged position—because they have a need for order and stability, which can be met with the existing system (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Van der Toorn & Jost, 2014). Therefore, people can simultaneously be both supporters and ‘victims’ of the norms that maintain the existing system (Jost, 2018). This is especially relevant to the academic context in terms of understanding why many academics accommodate, rationalize and/or justify aspects and conditions of academic precarity (but see Täuber & Moughalian, 2022, for the boundary conditions of this approach in understanding advantaged and disadvantaged groups).

In addition to these social-psychological lenses, we will further borrow an inequality regime framework from sociology of organizations to better understand the ways in which we ‘do’ precarity and ‘be’ precarious in academia as an organizational setting. Acker (2006) examines how organizations maintain and reproduce regimes of inequality. Inequality regimes are defined as ‘loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender and racial inequalities within particular organizations’ (Acker, 2006, p. 443). Acker (2006) proposes control and compliance mechanisms that the powerful use to safeguard the perpetuation and reproduction of inequality regimes that benefit them and that when we analyse specific organizations (i.e., universities) and their local activities, it helps us to understand how we reproduce complex inequalities in these work organizations and the wider context. Thus, inequality regimes are expressed in power differentials that are embedded in organizational processes and caused by ‘enduring and systematic differences in access and control over resources for provisions and survival’ (p. 444). She further proposes that the local and ongoing practical activities of organizing (in our case, organizing work in academia) reproduce complex inequalities and further argues that organizational processes are associated with how and what we do, and they can be connected to direct (explicit) or indirect (implicit) organizational controls. Direct controls are explicit mechanisms that are systemic and determined by a structure (e.g., rewards, wages or promotion criteria) while indirect controls are more implicit mechanisms that determine how to follow structures, rules and norms in each setting (e.g., specific research practices, implicit norms). For example, promotion criteria cause academics on fixed-term contracts or in temporary positions to engage in certain scholarly activities more than others (direct controls), but these criteria are also determined by academics in tenured or permanent tenured positions who have a greater authority on organizational decision-making to amend the norms (indirect control). According to Acker (2006), the basis for this inequality regime in organizations derives partially from power differences due to the social categories one belongs to (e.g., class, gender, race, sexuality, religion, age and disability) as well as other—perhaps more implicitly formed—aspects of variations in power (such as job status and prestige). This inequality regime framework provides a structure to understand precarity in the specific organizational context of academia under which the links between the groups we belong to (SIT) and power differentials that maintain the status quo (SJT) can be more constructively explored (see also Täuber & Moughalian, 2022).

## UNDERSTANDING PRECARIETY IN THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT

The subjective experience of individuals who are ‘precarious’ is related to the structural issues of inter-group relations and inequalities (Täuber & Moughalian, 2022; Thorkelson, 2016). Thus, we will unpack academic precarity under both organizational and personal conditions. We will first scrutinize how we are ‘doing’ precarity by developing and maintaining organizational practices that create and recreate precarious conditions. We will then assess how precarious conditions play a role on the subjective experiences of academics ‘being’ precarious. We aim to understand some of the different ways in which precarity operates at the organizational and individual levels; therefore, our analysis is composed of these two levels. However, this should not mean that organizational practice and subjective experience are independent from each other. We argue that they are interrelated, but they require a separate examination to develop a more nuanced understanding. Moreover, identity construction and related processes occur when people

engage in collaborative meaning making within their social worlds (Reddy & Gleibs, 2019); therefore, *being* is fundamentally relational and intrinsically linked to being made. We argue that subjective experience (*being precarious*) is often the outcome of organizational practice (*doing precarious*) and should be recognized as *being made precarious*. We will refer to the subjective experience as ‘being precarious’ instead of ‘being made precarious’ for simplicity but also for underscoring our specific focus on the subjective experience that arises after people are *made* precarious.

## Prearity as an organizational practice: ‘Doing’ prearity

A plethora of situations can be discussed as examples of organizational practices that reinforce (or ‘do’) prearity in academia. One of the most common conditions is the stagnation of public funding for research and higher education. Using a political-economy perspective, Carpenter et al. (2021) argue that academia is experiencing a crisis in social reproduction driven by increased tenuous and heterogeneous compositions of university budgets resulting from a move away from state funding. They further discuss that this situation causes the professionalization of academia through set expectations based on academic reproduction as well as institutional reputation. From this perspective, academic institutions make decisions at the organizational level to both politically and economically deal with this stagnation of public funding for research and higher education. As a result, many institutions seek greater flexibility in staffing costs, which they usually manage by reducing permanent jobs. There are many ways how such unilateral management processes can detrimentally shift organizational practices. For example, academics with temporary contracts are expected to produce research outputs like those of tenured academics—despite their research being under-budgeted (Callard, 2022). However, if they fail to achieve those outputs, the explanation for this is then in the lack or inefficiency of researchers’ skills, rather than their precarious working conditions; thus, blame is put on the individual rather than the system. Governments can exacerbate this situation by focusing on productivity and ignoring the organizational conditions that influence this productivity. For instance, the British and German governments reinforce the precarious conditions in academia by distributing research funding to a few ‘elite’ universities leaving others understaffed and underfunded (OECD, 2021).

Such direct organizational controls in academia are legitimized through the concept of excellence (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). Excellence in academia is discussed in terms of productivity, citations, international and outstanding publications and memberships in (editorial) boards (Basu, 2006). These markers of excellence are connected to the persisting norms of meritocracy, which sorts people into positions and makes distributions based on *individual* performance or talents (Scully, 2002). They are perceived to be neutral and objective and further perpetuated by the belief that academics should be judged on merit alone and that other categories (e.g., gender, race or class) contexts (e.g., a less prestigious university, a Global South country) or detrimental experiences (e.g., harassment, bullying; Täuber et al., 2022) should not matter or be given much weight. This belief results in an organizational culture that is defined by individual success and competitiveness as main drivers (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012) and works as an internal control. Furthermore, the effects of neoliberalism in this academic system bolsters the competitiveness of the notion of excellence and reduces the meaning and value of collaboration and the importance of social responsibilities, and ultimately, the power of those who are financially privileged increases with the growing incorporation of a market ideology in higher education. (Giroux, 2015). Tenured academics from the top universities in the Global North countries might, exemplarily, have more collaboration opportunities than their colleagues elsewhere. In effect, a thorough analysis of the International Society of Political Psychology conference proceedings shows that (1) those from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic; Henrich et al., 2010) countries have more collaborations than those from non-WEIRD countries, (2) scholars from non-WEIRD countries contribute to the production of knowledge through their collaborations with those from WEIRD countries and (3) those from non-WEIRD countries do not collaborate with each other (Mhlongo, 2017). These results demonstrate the privilege researchers from WEIRD countries hold and how academics from precarious

positions are forced to collaborate with the privileged academics to be able to contribute to hegemonic knowledge production with more impact (Bou Zeineddine et al., 2022; Coultas, 2022).

Another example of maintaining unequal norms of practice in academia is the publication system. To climb the ranks of academia, to be perceived as excellent, and/or to reach a permanent position, an important precursor is publishing in 'high-ranking' journals (Burrows, 2012). The organizational process of 'publish or perish' is considered one of the core principles measuring academic success and associated practices (such as promotion and retention), and it is used as a form of direct organizational control. This organizational control regarding publishing is made possible by the hierarchical nature of academia where recruitment, promotion and tenure are directly related to the number of articles published in a selected number of 'top journals' (De Rond & Miller, 2005). Hence, academics are often forced to play a 'numbers game' to earn a permanent position, which requires an exceptional publication record. This numbers game does not cater to the conditions of those academics who are most affected by precarious conditions (such as adjunct staff and junior faculty and/or academics from the Global South; see Albayrak-Aydemir, 2020; Bou Zeineddine et al., 2022; Hanafi & Arvanitis, 2014), further bolstering precarity as an organizational practice. The example of the academic publishing system can be further elaborated on to demonstrate how 'doing' precarity can also affect the ways in which academic work is conducted. The pressure to publish in a relatively narrow set of journals relates directly to what is studied and how. Being expected to publish many papers in a rather short period of time between graduating and getting a permanent job might mean that methods that take time and resources (such as ethnographic and longitudinal approaches) will be avoided. Similarly, topics that are difficult to study (e.g., illegal activities, sexual behaviours and underprivileged settings) or populations that are hard to reach (e.g., refugees, religious minorities and activist groups) might also not be preferable given pressures to succeed quickly.

Academics who follow alternative ways of research are often ostracized in academia and might struggle to earn recognition. Indeed, many of the 'top' journals in the social sciences (e.g., *Nature Human Behaviour*, *PLoS ONE*, *Science*) as well as in social psychology (e.g., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *European Journal of Social Psychology*) are very much focused on quantitative (and particularly experimental) methods with a narrow set of samples or populations that are easily reached online (Sassenberg & Ditrich, 2019). In that sense, getting published in 'top' journals could be seen as more of a tick-box practice than a deep and meaningful engagement with the scientific topic at issue (McPhetres et al., 2021). The pressure to succeed in a short amount of time (and the academic work it results in) also set the norms for what it means to be a 'successful' academic. For instance, the dominance of the United States (both in terms of researchers and participants) and accepting this dominance as 'the ideal' leads to a plethora of problems for the field of psychology, one of which is establishing norms embedded from the American culture in the United States and generalizing psychological knowledge based on these norms without recognizing 'biased' assumptions (IJzerman et al., 2021). This means that (white) American scholars as researchers and people as study participants from the United States are assumed to be 'neutral' in psychological research whereas researchers from other parts of the world (or even from other demographic backgrounds in the United States) are asked to prove their objectivity (as if this is something that can be done) or rationalize their choice of samples by explaining how their samples' cultural characteristics differ from the 'regular' samples (see, for example, Gómez et al., 2021; Yip et al., 2021 for work on systematic exclusion of Black, Latinx, Asian and Indigenous people in the United States). These norms also force scholars to publish their research in English if they want to be considered globally competent experts (Curry & Lillis, 2004; Flowerdew & Li, 2009; Hanafi & Arvanitis, 2014). When they do not prefer to or are not able to publish and network in English, their works are regarded as irrelevant or lacking 'excellent' standards. Thus, scholars who make academic contributions in their native language (apart from those whose native language is English) are often excluded from international academic publishing due to the cultural conventions (as well as the associated financial requirements with these conventions; Bou Zeineddine et al., 2022) that are developed based on Anglo-Saxon practices. This situation, in turn, not only ostracizes academics who publish and network in other languages and distance their work from a global readership but also reinforce the idea that

scholarship that is published in English based on the Western academic traditions is ‘the mainstream’ and that any other forms of scholarship should adapt to it to deserve a global engagement.

These practices are connected to another important organizational control related to who gets a job (i.e., the job market). Typically, before moving on to the job market, prospective academics (PhD candidates, postdoctoral fellows, etc.) try to gain experience in scholarly practices that are expedient to them in their next step. However, the limit of expectations for even minimum experience gets higher with time, substantially influencing what is perceived important by the future generation of academics. For instance, the priority put on research publications has grown over the past few decades, possibly at the expense of research quality as well as other academic activities (Schimanski & Alperin, 2018). This trend sends signals to future generations of academics by ignoring the process of gaining research as well as other much-needed academic skills, such as teaching. Hence, many academics try to publish as fast as possible to meet the expectations for an exceptional research record, which seems to be the most important ‘currency’ on the job market. This eventually leads to a ‘fast-science’ culture that is ‘bad for both science and scientists’ (Frith, 2020, p. 1) as it threatens what it means to be a scientist (e.g., *being* an academic) and aggravates the production of meaningful scientific knowledge (e.g., *doing* academia). The fast-science culture could bolster precarious working conditions in academia and damage the quality of academic work produced. Social psychology as a field can be considered one of the most famous culprits of this culture. In the last decade, the validity of many social-psychological findings has begun to be questioned. Exemplarily, many false-positive results together with questionable research practices have led to a so-called ‘replication crisis’ (Wiggins & Christopherson, 2019), turning social psychology into a field where there are abundant but weak findings. Eventually, social psychology has diminished its reputation and credibility as a scientific field—and so social psychologists as scientists. In response to this, Phaf (2020) convincingly argues that we need to have more theoretical, rather than methodological, engagement as improving publication practices would not necessarily make theoretical hypotheses more robust.

Consequently, these examples of organizing processes create and recreate inequalities in terms of power, positionality, resources, etc. in ways that are difficult to challenge by individuals (Acker, 2006). Yet, still, we can (and should) challenge these organizing processes at our own capacity. We recommend critically reflecting on our own positions as researchers and the baseline practices we accept as ‘the default’, so that we can be open for change in academia. A plethora of precarious conditions are not just the results of a neoliberal market but also the consequences of long-standing organizational traditions within academia. As academics, we have a responsibility to critically evaluate these academic traditions and not to automatically adapt to them. We also believe that this responsibility increases as academics go up in the academic ladder. So, academics in higher positions should have a greater responsibility but also a bigger autonomy to question the existing system, and their questioning might, in turn, open more space for discussing positive change. However, it can be hard to recognize the disadvantages of the current organizational systems in academia, especially for those who perceive themselves as working, sacrificing and achieving a lot to deserve their current ‘excellent’ positions in the academic ranks. This lack of recognition could make them further think that it is ‘possible’ to work and get what you ‘deserve’ in return (Täuber & Moughalian, 2022). Thus, academics (who were once the ‘victims’ of this system but are now the ‘winners’ of it) might end up defending the current system even though its organizational culture and norms create and recreate precarious conditions that make it harder to survive in this system, a point we return to in the next section.

## Precurity as a subjective experience: ‘Being’ precarious

The organizational practices we described here will have an influence on how we see ourselves and who we are. ‘Doing’ and ‘being’ precarious are intrinsically linked both at the theoretical and practical level, and it seems of great importance to separately explore what being a precarious academic (i.e., the process of ‘becoming and belonging’ as a precarious academic) entails. We take an identity perspective because identity is a root concept that incorporates the interests, values, abilities and norms a person ascribes to the self in the context of a social role, such as the profession of an academic (Tajfel & Turner, 1979);



it consists of cognitive (I am), evaluative (I value) and emotional (I feel) components. In the context of academia, the norms and values an academic should embody are usually centred around the vocation and passion of academics, which might, in turn, reduce interrogations of employment conditions, the nature of work, and so, the precarity at work (Callard, 2022). An academic identity may be based on how an academic *values* and their *feelings* about academia. The content of an identity (such as values) would lead to associated behaviours and 'doing' (such as routine practices shaped by values; Ashforth et al., 2008). For example, the existing peer-review system for publishing, which is at the heart of the publication system described above, is vastly dependent on the belief that academics serve back to their community by reviewing other academics' papers for publication in scientific journals. This strong sense of academic community would elicit the associated action of peer-reviewing, but it also prevents academics from acknowledging and acting upon the exploitation of their free labour. Brouillette (2013) specifies this condition by writing that the 'faith that our work offers non-material rewards is more integral to our identity than a 'regular' job would be, makes us ideal employees when the goal of management is to extract our labour's [sic] maximum value at minimum cost'. Our view of what it means to 'be an academic' is strongly linked to how we 'do' academia.

Yet, when the sense of self is closely connected to an affective attachment of a positive identity content, it could also lead to minimize dissent with the work conditions and makes the inequalities in the system and precarious conditions easier to sustain (Brienza, 2016), which could explain why it is difficult to resist precarious work conditions. Thus, many academics (both those who are precarious and not) might accommodate and rationalize the status quo of the system they are embedded in. Although, we might argue that compliance might be driven by pragmatic concerns and 'dependency by choice' (Bou Zeineddine et al., 2022; Hanafi & Arvanitis, 2014), another reason could be that many of us have internalized values of meritocracy to protect the positive identity content. Furthermore, the professional identity of being an academic can involve the development of an awareness of not only the values and responsibilities but also of the personal resources that are essential in the professional environment of academia (Jensen & Jetten, 2015). In effect, Kira and Balkin (2014) argue that identity can influence and be influenced by work environments in the perception of an interaction between one's professional identity and specific work situation. Thus, an employee experiences work as being meaningful when the work context and the identity are aligned. However, employees can feel frustrated if the working conditions and the identity are not aligned—and this can have lasting consequences for work practices ('doing') and identity development ('being'). Kira and Balkin (2014) propose several ways in which the work and the identity can interact, one of which is specifically relevant to precarious working conditions: the asymmetrical alignment of the work situations (e.g., precarious work) and the identities (e.g., academic identity). This asymmetrical alignment can result in *withering*, which is defined 'as such a negative outcome from employees' identification with preferred identities' (p. 136). So, employees start to wither at work, rather than thrive, when their working conditions and identities are asymmetrically aligned. Importantly, Kira and Balkin (2014) discuss that withering makes it less likely to express less-preferred elements of a professional identity and makes it harder to build resources and express resistance to secure the alignment between the work conditions and preferred identities in the long term.

We extend this idea and argue that the work conditions and structures influence identity content (Ashmore et al., 2004). In that sense, an academic identity contains an ambivalent content when, on the one hand, individuals experience a strong and positive professional identity (a reason why many of us chose to become academics in the first place) and, on the other hand, have the experience of precariousness and negative work conditions. This ambivalent identity content could harm the identity construction of academics, and they may develop a stronger sense of pride to avoid this harm and cope with the feelings of precariousness. For example, they may feel like they sacrificed a lot to be in their current position (for example by moving often or forgoing higher salaries); therefore, they may continue to defend the existing precarious conditions to honour their 'lost' labour or opportunities. Again, the 'doing' and organizational practices in academia and our justification of those are directly related to 'being precarious' because the conditions of unequal organizational practices contribute to ambivalent identity connected to stigmatized work conditions.

Kreiner et al.' (2006) work on stigmatized work becomes applicable here. More precisely, they examine how system justification theory and social identity theory can complement each other and explain how individuals and groups deal with identities associated with stigmatized work. Their approach helps to understand not only when individuals seek to actively combat stigmas but also when group members internalize stigmas and lose collective esteem. They suggest that most occupations carry some form of stigma. As a result of conflicting occupational and societal influences, stigmatized workers can experience identification, disidentification and ambivalence. In the context of academia, a precarious academic identity as described above ('being precarious') could be classified as carrying compartmentalized stigma, where some elements/facets of the group are stigmatized while others are not. This compartmentalized stigma could be associated with a degree of occupational disidentification, but other aspects of the occupation may be still valued. Furthermore, compartmentalized stigma could lead to fewer shared and more individualistic defence tactics such as 'playing the game' to escape precarious work conditions and engaging in many of the organizational practises addressed above. The ambivalent identity content of 'being an academic' and possibly 'being precarious' as well as the resulting stigmatized identity could, under some conditions (for example, when there is a lack of alternatives), lead to rationalization or even justification of the system, disidentification from group or individualistic coping mechanisms—all of which could leave the academic status-quo unchallenged.

Importantly, an identity is both individually crafted and shaped by relations with others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which means that the ways an academic perceives and interacts with other academics may contribute to the development of their own academic identity. Thus, many members of the academic community consider the professional group they belong to as a source of pride associated with academic values, freedom, ethics and accomplishment. This may lead to strong levels of identification with their academic identity and can be a source of job satisfaction and sense of accomplishment (Pearson et al., 2012). Seeing these, an-academic-to-be might start to feel proud to develop their academic identity and choose individual tactics to survive in academia, regardless of how precarious they may feel or be. So, this may result in them 'loving their work but hating their job' as exemplified by the research conducted by Osbaldiston et al. (2019).

These identity processes should be reconnected to the structural issues that are inherent in academia and used to highlight differences between academics who were once precarious (but now safe and secure) and who are currently made precarious. Afonso (2014) describes the academic job market as being in many ways structured like a drug gang. There is an expanding mass of 'outsiders' and a shrinking core of 'insiders', letting the outsiders believe that they can make it, too. More precisely, with a steady increase of PhDs awarded, the number of researchers available to the academic job market has grown at a time when the number of permanent positions has stagnated or even decreased (Woolston, 2021). For example, approximately 75% of academic staff in the United States are now on temporary or fixed-term contracts (Tolley, 2018). This number of academics increases to over 80% in Germany where 30,000 academics are awarded PhDs per year to potentially compete for 47,000 full professorships overall—as only full professors have permanent jobs in Germany (Afonso, 2016). Yet, as Afonso (2014) argues many 'outsiders' (untenured/adjunct academics) stay in the labour market because it is the prospect of future wealth and prestige that motivates them, rather than current income and working conditions. Academia is increasingly characterized by such dualization: the divide between those people with secure and stable positions and those with fixed-term and/or precarious positions. Dualized labour markets rely on outsiders to forgo wages and employment security in exchange for the promise of prestige, security and a stable income (Afonso, 2016)—a promise based on a future self. Further, the insiders with privileges restrict access to publications, grants and jobs for outsiders without privileges and are usually responsible for setting up direct controls such as promotion criteria or decisions about hiring (as we have described in previous sections). Additionally, it is also the insiders' rationalization or justification of and profiting from the current academic system that keeps the precarious conditions going for future generations of academics (Täuber & Moughalian, 2022). This situation creates and recreates precarious conditions and detrimentally affects the ways in which new academics form their academic identities and, therefore, hinders positive change.

McCarthy et al.'s (2017) political-economy perspective on the issues of dualized job market are relevant here and can be used to illustrate the identity formations of early-career academics. They suggest that work done by academics is turned into corporate and managerial tasks, which has separated academics from the purpose of their work, removing autonomy and control over how to use their skills and eventually by implementing more surveillance mechanisms to check for the deindividualized work tasks. The growing dissociation between academics and their work might cause academics to lose the meaning of their jobs and enhance the creation of stigmatized work and ambivalent identities. Hence, these structural issues of academic work play a critical role especially for those who are at the early stages of their career. Early-career academics, who are restricted in determining the course of their own academic careers by the organizational controls, might feel insecure and inadequate and bounded by various structural factors such as the publication system, job-market criteria, teaching load expectations, etc. (Bone, 2019). Thus, the current academic system damages the freedom of academics to develop their work based on the values they care about and to make meaningful contributions to academia (Lynch & Ivancheva, 2015). Consequently, many academics may prefer to leave academia to find meaningful jobs elsewhere. Yet, they may also adopt individual resistance tactics (such as the Indigenous psychology movement in Taiwan; Gabrenya et al., 2006 or an alternative knowledge production movement in Turkey; Aydin, 2021). Although these tactics can be beneficial to many individuals especially at the local level, they also highlight the difficulty faced for changing and challenging the current academic system by academics in precarious positions and the need to understand the complex relationships between being an academic and existing within a precarious academic system. To reconstruct the present academic system, the first thing we need to do (and what we aimed to achieve with this special issue) is to collectively question the system—as beautifully put by Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg (2017), ‘We are still only limited by our collective willingness to reimagine and take action.’

## CONCLUSION

In our social-psychological framework of academic precarity, we have shown that the ways in which academics work are connected to the ways they think about themselves as scientific selves (Morawski, 2020). We argue that the organizational practices that create precarious conditions and the subjective experiences of being (made) precarious (by these organizational practices but also by the unequal power dynamics deriving from society at large) are bidirectional. Although organizational practices may play a larger role in the formation of precarious conditions, addressing these conditions without fully understanding what it means to become precarious would not provide a comprehensive solution to the problems caused by academic precarity.

We need to first identify the organizational mechanisms that produce academic precarity and explore how these mechanisms influence those who were once precarious and those who are currently precarious to comprehend the role of organizations (and individuals through organizational decision-making) in producing and reinforcing academic precarity. This entails a focus away from the ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘precarious’, to those in privileged positions to understand how different forms of system-supporting resistance that dominant groups and individuals enact can be understood and challenged. This is vital because change towards equality and equity in academia should be possible, but it is difficult to achieve because of entrenched interests by power holders (Täuber & Moughalian, 2022) and the perceived legitimacy of the existing system that is further internalized by many academics and rooted in their academic identities. Hence, making privileges and inequalities visible and decreasing the perceptions of legitimacy might open opportunities for an attack on the inequality regime that maintains precarity as an organizational practice and as a subjective experience in academia. This also emphasizes that the central pivot should be on reshaping and alleviating the overall organization and organizational culture, rather ‘fixing’ single individuals within organization.

As the responses to the ‘replicability crisis’ show, the unilateral response to the problems only deepens a crisis whereas a dialectical approach (between, for example, theory and methods, or in our case, organ-

izational practice and subjective experience of precarity but also between individual and organization, privileged and disadvantaged and hegemonic knowledge and alternative ways of knowing) can provide a critical understanding of the tensions and a more holistic solution to the problems (Dafermos, 2015). Thus, what is needed is broad systemic and cultural changes to contest inequality in academia and to foster diversity in our thinking for a successful transformation of scholarly practices and identities. This means that we move away from existing conventions, trends and organizational practices in the field, which focus on a relatively narrow set of theories, methodologies and approaches to research to more open, disconnected and unconventional avenues of knowledge creation (Krpan, 2020a, 2020b). By doing so, we can disrupt the current academic system and have wider inclusion of diversified voices in academia, as well as in the production of academic knowledge (Albayrak, 2018a; Reddy et al., 2021). This will make it necessary that we endure conflict and complexity and embrace discomfort when we discuss power relations, privilege and the realities that many who are marginalized and precarious face (Reddy et al., 2021). For this aim, we need to acknowledge that this crisis of social reproduction in universities is understood in the way that universities are dynamic and powerful contributors to capitalist transformations and that they are not just defensive walls against what comes from 'outside' (Callard, 2022) and is embedded in a wider system of inequality. This is also true for us as academics as we are part of a system and related to an inequality regime. So, we must also question how much we have internalized a neoliberal system and how much we comply and might benefit from perpetuating and reproducing an unequal system. Thus, a substantive shift is required in the ways we see ourselves, our profession and the discipline but also the set-up incentive structures and academic practices. For example, researchers should be encouraged to work on longer-term projects that depend on collaborations. Large collaborations can be helpful in challenging the idea of the 'lone genius' and shifting attention to the importance of teamwork, partnerships and the different roles and contributions in scholarly practices (Holcombe, 2019).

We need an academic system that rewards and pays contributors fairly and equitably and allows everyone to feel included in academia to make inputs to scientific knowledge production. Recruiting and retaining people with different skills to advance knowledge might be a more appropriate strategy than getting only the best, most excellent and most popular individuals. Likewise, the evaluation of professional qualifications and outputs should focus on the whole spectrum of scholarly practices (e.g., teaching, service, research and public engagement), not just on the narrow concept of research excellence (Herschberg et al., 2018) and where possible, they should consider the contextual factors, such as the actual time and resources that are available to the academic. This would ideally help reducing precarious workloads and at least help recognizing and acknowledging precarity that academics endure because of using different practices and coming from untraditional backgrounds. Creating a climate that allows for diversity of thought and practice and also, values collaborative efforts to thrive and requires leadership that instil trust in the competence and good intentions of others, instead of fuelling the competition for superiority in approaches and methods. It requires leaders who are sensitive to structural barriers and challenges. We need to create an academic environment in which our actions should be fuelled not only with responsibility but also with a desire to achieve an open, fair and equal scholarship (Albayrak, 2018b). In doing so, it is important to acknowledge the different roles and uses of activism and scholarship in order not to turn activism or social justice into another tick-box practice for academics (Walsh & Gokani, 2014).

## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

**Nihan Albayrak-Aydemir** and **Ilka Helene Gleibs** involved in conceptualization, writing the original draft, review and editing.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

## **DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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