



Precarity in late life: Understanding new forms of risk and insecurity



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A B S T R A C T

Population aging and longevity in the context of declining social commitments, raises concerns about disadvantage and widening inequality in late life. This paper explores the concept of precarity as a means to understand new and sustained forms of risk and insecurity that affect late life. The article begins with a review of the definition and uses of precarity in a range of scholarly fields including social gerontology. It then draws on illustrations from three locations of experience including older women, aging with a disability, and the foreign-born, to outline how precarity renders visible the disadvantages carried into late life, and new insecurities that emerge at the moment of needing care in the context of austerity. The argument being put forward is that precarity can be used to illustrate how risks and insecurities, experienced over time, in longevity, and the context of austerity, can deepen disadvantage. This lens thus holds the potential to challenge individual interpretations of risk, and situate experiences of disadvantage in the economic and political context. We conclude that contemporary conditions of austerity and longevity intersect to produce and sustain risk and disadvantage into late life.

A combination of changes in the labor market, responses to population aging, and the retrenchment of public services, have contributed to increased levels of insecurity in late life. In contrast, major discourses on aging often focus on health, activity and success. Yet, beneath accolades of 'longevity as a story of success' comes evidence of widening inequality among older people (Biggs, 2014; Ferraro & Shippee, 2009; Rek-Woźniak, 2014). Where risks related to labor and migration are well-documented in early periods of the life course, research has overlooked the implications of these in late life. This is especially the case where the realities of aging, and in particular the need for care, brush up against individualized interpretations of risk and responsibility. In this context, economic and political conditions can be added to the myriad of factors that may alter experiences of late life (Dumas & Turner, 2015; Phillipson, 2015).

This paper argues that the decline of the welfare state has created the need for a new approach to understanding the new forms of insecurity affecting later life. The concept of precarity (defined below) is presented as one way both of understanding the changed circumstances facing many groups of older people, and situating these in a

transformed social and political context. The argument of this paper is predicated on understandings of aging that are structured, experienced, and mediated through aging bodies and social and cultural relations (Baars, Dohmen, Grenier, & Phillipson, 2014; Biggs, Estes & Phillipson, 2003; Twigg & Martin, 2015). That is, the idea that aging and late life are accompanied (and produced) by material (i.e., loss of income through retirement), and corporeal realities (i.e., illness, loss, the need for care), that occur at the intersection of policies, structures, discourses, and experiences of health and aging (Grenier, 2012).

The paper begins with an overview of the concept of precarity, drawing upon key research in the field. The discussion then turns to three locations - gender, disability, and im/migration - to make the case for focusing on precarity in relation to experiences of aging and later life. In each, we present statistics from Canada and the United Kingdom as a means of illustrating experiences of precarity. These examples are used to highlight the extent to which current trends signal concern for the wellbeing of disadvantaged groups in the context of population aging. The paper argues that consideration of the concept of precarity will provide gerontological scholarship with the means to conceptualize

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and politicize forms of risk and insecurity beyond biological and functionalist approaches located in (and on) aging bodies (see [Bornat & Bytheway, 2010](#); [Pickard, 2009](#)), situating older people's needs within the context of declining networks of support.

Precarious: an evolving concept of insecurity and risk

The *Oxford English Dictionary* records and guides the use of the English language, thereby providing insight into cultural frames of reference, meaning and experience. To be precarious is to be at risk, or vulnerable, in some way. According to the [Precarious \(Def. 1\) \(2016\)](#), precarious (adj) is defined as ‘a right, tenancy’ (i.e., held or enjoyed by the favor of and at the pleasure of another person), and a condition whereby one is ‘vulnerable to the will or decision of others’. The literal definitions of the concept precarious range from: ‘a line of argument, inference, opinion (e.g., insecurely founded or reasoned, doubtful, dubious)’, to being ‘dependent on chance or circumstance; uncertain; liable to fail; exposed to risk, hazardous; insecure, unstable’, to ‘subject to or fraught with physical danger or insecurity; at risk of falling, collapse, or similar accident; unsound, unsafe, rickety’. The definition of the term thus signals an alignment with uncertainty, insecurity, vulnerability,¹ and risk. It also references shifting socio-historical interpretations linked to need and the provision of care.

Existing academic literature conceptualizes precarity—and the state of precariousness—in relation to risk and insecurity. [Waite \(2009\)](#) for example, refers to precarity as “life worlds characterized by uncertainty and insecurity” (p.426). Researchers such as [Grenier et al. \(2017\)](#) develop an approach to precarity that draws together insights from labor market perspectives, such as those advanced by [Standing \(2010\)](#), with the cultural readings of authors such as [Butler \(2009\)](#). [Standing \(2010\)](#) outlines how a life characterized by a chronic state of uncertainty and instability can lead to a ‘truncated status’ and reduction of basic rights (civil, political, economic, social and cultural) (p.8). [Butler \(2009\)](#) renders explicit the political and shared nature of such conditions, defining precarity as a “politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (p. 25).

Three aspects can be found in the academic literature on precarity: first, it is positioned at the interface of structured conditions and everyday lives—that is, precarity is formed and experienced in relation to locations such as labor and migration, and as will be argued, aging. Second, precarity is used to describe shared and/or intersecting forms of inequality, disadvantage, and potential suffering.² In doing so, it holds the potential for analyzing how risks and insecurities cut across diverse social locations such as those explored in this paper (e.g., low income, gender, disability, and migration), and may extend into later life. Finally, precarity is not only a social critique, but also a point of action. A common notion among scholars is that precarity implies “both a condition and a possible rallying point for resistance” ([Waite, 2009](#), p.426).

Applications of precarity: risks related to labor, im/migration, and aging

Research on precarity documents changes in the socio-political environment tied to globalization, new forms of work, and a contracting

¹ Although there is a suggested link between precarity and vulnerability, the definitions and uses of the terms precarity and vulnerability have particular socio-historical trajectories, and distinct applications with regards to aging. The relationship between precarity and vulnerability will be explored elsewhere (Grenier, in development).

² Such an analysis can then include social processes and trajectories of disadvantage related to age, disability, gender, racialization, migration, and so forth, rather than operate on the assumption of determined social categories, or that disadvantage operates as a fixed and additive model of jeopardy and risk.

welfare state ([Streeck, 2016](#)). This new environment alters and re-locates contemporary forms of inequality among workers and migrants, especially those deemed ‘undeserving’ or ‘irresponsible’ ([Standing, 2010, 2012](#)). Studies of precarity span inter-disciplinary boundaries of labor studies, migration, sociology, and geography ([Lewchuk et al., 2008](#); [Waite, 2009](#)), drawing on research from Europe and North America ([Gallie, Paugam, and Jacobs, 2003](#); [Lewchuk et al., 2015](#)). Scholars working in this field focus on the relationship between precarious status and risk ([Standing, 2010](#)); the production of precariousness through neoliberal policies ([Grundy and Laliberte Rudman, 2016](#); [Porter, 2015](#)); the implications of the rise of insecure or ‘precarious’ employment (e.g., contract or self-employed work, part-time work, seasonal or temporary work of migrants) ([Avant, 2017](#); [Bowe, 2008](#); [Vosko, 2006](#)); and how insecure labor and migration intersect to compound inequality ([Marier & Skinner, 2008](#); [Oxman-Martinez et al., 2005](#)).

Sub-populations considered more likely to be precarious include persons with particular work trajectories (e.g., those associated with part-time and temporary employment), youth, women, migrants, people with disabilities, and the criminalized ([Buffel & Phillipson, 2011](#); [Laliberte Rudman et al., 2010](#); [Standing, 2010](#)). In Canada, [Vosko \(2006\)](#) has outlined the problems associated with precarious work, including economic insecurity; under-employment; inability to exercise agency; and tensions in family and community life. A similar argument has been made with regards to unpaid or under-paid women in precarious sectors such as care-work, house-work, or call centers ([Baines, Cunningham, Campey, & Shields, 2014](#); [Huws, 2003](#); [Lewis, Dwyer, Hodkinson, & Waite, 2015](#)). However, although offering a strong critique of labor and migration-related risks, little attention has focused on how such precarious trajectories continue into and/or affect experiences in later life.

The small but growing literature that uses precarity in relation to aging has focused primarily on labor-related issues arising from insecure employment ([Biggs, 2014](#); [Craciun & Flick, 2014](#); [McGann et al., 2016](#)), the limited retirement prospects of immigrant men ([Hum & Simpson, 2010](#)), and the marginalization of people with a disability in finding secure forms of employment ([Bohle, Pitts, & Quinlan, 2010](#); [D'Amours, 2009](#)). Although much of the literature on precarity and aging is work-related, the concept of precarity has been extended to the experiences of those living alone ([Portacolone, 2013](#)), as well as the vulnerabilities associated with disability ([Knight, 2014](#)), dementia, and the ‘fourth age’ ([Grenier et al., 2017](#)).

Despite this literature, research has yet to consider how the impact of precarity—or ‘precarious trajectories’—may be compounded through longevity, and inequalities experienced over the life course. The next section of this paper examines this issue, drawing on three sub-populations of older people who are over-represented in terms of later life poverty³: older women, people aging with a disability, and the foreign-born.⁴ The pressures facing these groups, as described below, demonstrates the need for a new framework to understand insecurity in later life.⁵ The review of income inequalities affecting these groups will be used to draw attention to the utility of the concept of precarity for understanding the intersection between age and inequality given

³ Although precarity entails more than income, we draw on poverty statistics as a crude measure of inequality.

⁴ The 2016 Evidence-Informed National Seniors Strategy for Canada lists seven groups of older Canadians that are “more likely to have unmet home and community care needs due to a variety of social and economic determinants that limit their access to these services.” ([Sinha et al., 2016](#), p.88). The groups listed include: low income older Canadians, caregivers, older women, immigrants, oldest Canadians, older adults with physical limitations, and older adults who live alone. This list corresponds directly with the population groups we explore in this paper, and in our research.

⁵ The idea to explore precarity emerged from our respective works on homelessness, retirement, disability and migration. Our Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded research will explore precarity at three locations of income inequality, disability, and (im)migration status (Project # 435-2016-0933; 2016-2021)

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