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Quality of life of NEET youth in comparative perspective: subjective well-being during the transition to adulthood

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we examine the self-reported subjective well-being (SWB) of youth who are ‘not in employment, education or training’ (NEET) across 24 countries in Europe. Theorizing from a youth transition regimes perspective focusing on the varying levels of social protection available to youth as well as social norms regarding the transition to adulthood, we attempt to understand the psychological outcomes associated with youth NEET statuses across country contexts. Using European Social Survey (ESS) data, we compare not only the SWB of NEET individuals with that of non-NEET youth, but also how it differs amongst specific NEET sub-categories. We hypothesize that the well-being of NEET youth will be highest where more comprehensive social protections are available, but that inequalities in well-being between NEET and non-NEET groups will be minimized in contexts where prolonged school-to-work transitions to adulthood are the social norm. We find that overall levels of well-being differ systematically amongst countries for both NEET and non-NEET groups, being highest in the Nordic countries. However, when examining relative scores that take into account the distribution of well-being within each country, we discover that inequalities between NEET sub-categories are also the most pronounced in these ‘universalistic’ contexts.

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Youth who are ‘not in employment, education or training’ (NEET) have become a prominent population sub-group in European social policy discussions. Research has explored the conceptual clarity of this social group (Maguire 2015), predictors and outcomes of NEET membership (Gladwell, Popli, and Tsuchiya 2016), and cross-national variations in group composition and characteristics (Bălan 2015). Indeed, an emerging body of evidence points to the strong role played by institutional arrangements, such as national education systems and labour market policies, in predicting youth unemployment and joblessness (Breen and Buchmann 2002). However, international comparative research is limited regarding the subjective well-being of NEET individuals (Goldman-Mellor et al. 2016; Ervasti and Venetoklis 2010), and lacking regarding the effects of national arrays of social policies and social norms on their levels of perceived welfare – despite the fact that such research exists for unemployed youth (Högberg, Strandh, and

Baranowska-Rataj 2019) and unemployed adults (Voßemer et al. 2018; Strandh 2001). The primary aim of the present study is thus to develop an international comparative perspective on the role of welfare state policy and societal norms in safeguarding the well-being of this vulnerable group.

In this study, we examine the subjective well-being (SWB) of NEET and non-NEET youth across 24 countries in Europe using European Social Survey (ESS) data. We frame our study from a youth transition regimes perspective (Pohl and Walther 2007; Walther 2006), focusing on the varying levels of social protection available, in terms of the attribution of social benefits (i.e. accessibility and generosity of the welfare state) (Kvist 2007; Korpi and Palme 1998) and the part of the welfare burden assumed by families (Ferrera 1996), but also in terms of the organization of school-to-work transitions and cultural norms governing the transition into adulthood (Gangl 2001; Wolbers 2007). This approach allows us to capture interplays in institutional arrangements, exploring both redistributive and preventative social policies, as well as taking into account social-cultural contexts (Brzinsky-Fay 2017). We propose that overall absolute levels of well-being of both NEET and non-NEET youth will depend strongly on both the universality and comprehensiveness of social benefits, while inequalities in well-being between NEET and non-NEET youth relative to average levels of SWB in their countries will depend on the rapidity and rigidity of the organization of transitions into adulthood and the social norms surrounding these transitions.

In a preliminary analysis, we briefly compare rates of NEET statuses among these contexts. Next, we measure one key marker of quality of life – self-reported SWB – in order to test our postulates regarding the well-being of these disengaged youth among countries. We find that country differences in the reported individual welfare outcomes of NEET youth are largely consistent with our hypotheses, with NEET youth faring best in absolute terms in contexts where social protections are accessible and generous, but better in relative terms where prolonged and family-supported youth transitions into adulthood are the norm. Furthermore, as expected, inequalities by NEET status are found across all countries, revealing the generalized non-market vulnerability of this social group. However, we also find strong evidence that these inequalities are not consistent across all NEET sub-groups, which has important ramifications for policy responses to non-market inequalities.

1. Literature review

1.1. 'NEET' youth: *Problematizing the concept*

The term 'NEET' describes young people who are 'not in education, employment or training'. The NEET rate is typically defined as the percentage of a given age group who is not employed and not involved in further education or training in a given population (Elder 2016). The age range defining NEET varies, but Eurostat focuses on those aged 15–34 years (Serracant 2014) and more recent analyses focus particularly on the population aged 20–34 (Eurostat 2018). This administrative label, originally used by government officials in the United Kingdom, has been criticized for being both stigmatizing in nature and imprecise: Indeed, researchers argue that NEET is 'a problematic concept that defines young people by what they are not, and subsumes under a negatively-perceived label a heterogeneous mix of young people whose varied situations and difficulties are not conceptualised' (Yates and Payne 2006, 329).

NEET statuses during young adulthood have impacts on a personal level, making individuals 'more likely to become disenfranchised and to suffer from poverty and social exclusion', and they clearly also have an effect at a macro-economic level, representing 'a considerable loss in terms of unused productive capacity and a considerable cost in terms of welfare payments' (Eurostat 2018, 3). Due to these detrimental effects of long periods of NEET status, numerous policy approaches have attempted to reduce the number of youths falling into the NEET category. Researchers have pointed out the need to disaggregate 'discrete categories of experience (unemployment, caring, travelling, sick, resting, learning)' in order to understand and effectively target policies (Furlong 2006, 554). For example, during the economic crisis, the rise in NEET rates 'was nearly entirely due to an increase in the rate of unemployed NEETs among youth; rates of inactive NEETs often remained stable or declined' (Carcillo and Königs 2015, 10).

This provides strong support for the approach of treating inactive and unemployed NEET youth as two separate groups, needing different policy interventions. Indeed, some researchers replace the term 'inactive' with the term 'neither in the labour force nor in education or training (NLFET)' to refer to those who 'would be without employment even in periods of economic growth, when more jobs are available' and 'need intervention to improve their chances of work participation' (Ose and Jensen 2017, 148). Furthermore, other researchers have argued for adapting 'the definition of NEET ... to exclude young mothers with care responsibilities who are not actively looking for a job' (Tamesberger and Bacher 2014, 1239), to highlight the specific nature of their situation and to acknowledge that unpaid caregiving activities may also be a valued choice for some individuals.

1.2 NEET statuses and quality of life

NEET statuses are associated with lower personal and social well-being. For example, NEET youth report poorer health and lower social trust and activity (Nordenmark et al. 2015) as well as higher odds of depression and lower life-satisfaction (Minh et al. 2020). NEET youth are more likely to have chronic health problems and to be overweight or obese (Robert et al. 2017, 265). Mental health problems are also more prevalent in the NEET population, and the associations between NEET status and concurrent mental health problems have been found to be 'independent of pre-existing mental health vulnerability' (Goldman-Mellor et al. 2016, 196). While NEET youth often report being committed to work and actively searching for jobs (even more so than their non-NEET peers, in some cases), they often describe themselves as having few 'soft' skills and do not feel optimistic about their chances of 'getting ahead in life' (Goldman-Mellor et al. 2016).

While more research remains to be done in this important area of study, important clues are found in research on the effects on unemployment on adults more generally. Unemployment has been shown to have strong negative impacts on non-monetary aspects of individuals' lives as well as on their financial well-being (Strandh 2001; Högberg, Strandh, and Baranowska-Rataj 2019). The most well-known theorization of these effects is that of Jahoda (1981, 1982), who explains the negative impact of unemployment as the result of the loss of the latent functions of employment, including time structure, social contact, collective purpose, status and identity, and regular activity, which are strongly related to individuals' subjective well-being. Research has shown that

'the need for economic control' and the need for 'life course predictability' are also both important in explaining losses in well-being experienced as a result of unemployment (Strandh 2001, 59). Furthermore, achievement of important life goals, such as intimacy and affiliation, has been found to be significantly lower among unemployed persons than among employed persons (Paul, Geithner, and Moser 2016).

These effects are likely to be quite different depending on the type of NEET status experienced by a young person. Some authors have shown that people who are not in the labour force report significantly less latent deprivation than unemployed people, although these individuals do show significantly more latent deprivation than employed people (Paul, Geithner, and Moser 2009). Notably, the case of those engaged in unpaid care work, mainly female and caring for their children within the home (and often called 'homemakers' or 'housewives'), has been found to be unique (Russell 2016). Indeed, despite all of the non-material functions of work, it has not been found that female homemakers suffer from lower well-being in the same way as other individuals who are unemployed or inactive (Treas, van der Lippe, and Tsui-o 2011; Gutiérrez-García et al. 2018).

1.3 Welfare state contexts

Groupings of countries in terms of rates and outcomes of NEET youth have already been found to 'overlap with the identification of welfare state regimes', exhibiting differing patterns in northern European or Scandinavian models, continental European models, Anglo-Saxon models, southern European models, and former socialist country models (Pastore 2018, 3). Some forms of welfare state support have been shown to attenuate the negative effects of unemployment on personal well-being. For example, recent research has found that the well-being of unemployed young people is better in contexts with higher unemployment benefit generosity, but hampered by higher active labour market policy (ALMP) expenditures (Voßemer et al. 2018; Högberg, Strandh, and Baranowska-Rataj 2019). These factors may work at odds, explaining why some researchers have found that 'the amount of welfare state provision to the unemployed has no significant effect on their life satisfaction' (Stavrova, Schlösser, and Fetchenhauer 2011, 168) and 'the decline in well-being during unemployment is also quite pronounced in the most developed welfare states' (Ervasti and Venetoklis 2010, 136). Indeed, as individuals are given more responsibility through social policies focused on activation, inequality may increasingly imply 'risks of social exclusion' (Pohl and Walther 2007, 536).

1.3.1 Youth transition regimes

National characteristics of welfare state provisions and dominant social norms bring to light country similarities and differences, which allow researchers to outline discrete types of 'youth transition regimes' (Pohl and Walther 2007; Walther 2006). These groupings are based on information encompassing various institutional and policy domains, such as education and training systems, employment regulation, social security systems, youth transition policies, and cultural norms encompassing 'the interpretative frames of concepts of youth and causes of labor market 'disadvantage' that dominate in different clusters' (Hadjivassiliou et al. 2016, 3). Broadly based on a welfare regimes approach, these unique combinations of institutional characteristics show very different outcomes.

Walther (2006) and Pohl and Walther (2007) describe five types of youth transition regimes: Universalistic, Liberal, Employment-Centered, Sub-Protective, and Post-Communist. In the first, personal development in the form of varied educationally based interventions is the focus of transition policies, supported by a strong sense of collective social responsibility. This takes the form of supportive activation policies and 'flexicurity' in the labour market (Hadjivassiliou et al. 2016) and is typified by the Nordic countries. The active labour market policies (ALMP) in these contexts have also, however, been criticized and linked not only to benefits being made conditional on participation in programs, but also to a lowering of benefits (Kvist and Greve 2011).

In the second, value is placed first and foremost on individual rights and responsibilities, which take precedent over collective provisions. Examples such as the workfare activation models seen in the UK characterize this type (Hadjivassiliou et al. 2016). School is organized in a stratified and selective manner in the third type, where it plays a strong role in 'allocating the younger generation towards occupational careers and social positions in different segments' (Pohl and Walther 2007, 547). This 'train first' approach emphasizes initial education and is exemplified by the conservative or Employment-Centered countries of Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, and the Netherlands.

The relatively low rate of permanent employment in the fourth has created a kind of 'dualistic' welfare regime that depends largely on the family and informal work to supplement social provisions, during a long 'waiting phase' in early adulthood characteristic of this type. The Mediterranean countries that make up this type show underdevelopment in terms of initial training and weak labour markets. The fifth and final type represents contexts where the school-to-work transition has changed from stable and secure but with very little choice, to high 'de-standardization, uncertainty and risk' since the fall of the communist, and often Soviet, regimes in these countries (Pohl and Walther 2007, 548).

These different welfare regime contexts not only have repercussions for the rates and effects of NEET statuses overall, but also have gendered consequences. Generally, women face greater uncertainties in their career paths than do men, due to increased risks of dismissal due to family-related contingencies, income loss and work interruptions (Estévez-Abe 2005), as well as skill depreciation and missed opportunities for additional work experience (Boeckmann, Misra, and Budig 2015; Pettit and Hook 2005). These risks are either attenuated or exacerbated by institutional factors such as family policies, which include public child-care provision and paid maternity and parental leave benefits (Estévez-Abe and Hethy-Maier 2013; Olivetti and Petrongolo 2017), and vary extensively between countries (Thévenon 2011; Thévenon and Luci 2012).

The universalistic countries illustrate the highest levels of female work force participation, but also show pronounced vertical and horizontal occupational sex segregation (Grönlund, Halldén, and Magnusson 2017; Estévez-Abe 2006). The liberal countries, to varying degrees, report higher participation and lower segregation. The sub-protective regimes show some of the highest NEET and youth unemployment rates and are typified by the more recent *en masse* entry of women into the labor market. The post-communist countries are today characterized by 'high percentages of NEETs due to family responsibilities', and who are almost exclusively women, although in the past these regimes were typified by very high female labor market participation (Caroleo et al. 2018, 159).

1.3.2 Hypotheses

Based on these contexts framing NEET youth experiences, we expect that NEET status will have different effects on youths' subjective well-being depending on these nationally specific institutional arrangements and social norms. The country selection in this study is determined both geographically and theoretically (we limit ourselves to European countries) and by available data (those countries who participated in at least three of the eight ESS survey rounds between 2002 and 2016). We identify five groups of countries, corresponding with the school-to-work youth transition regimes outlined above. Illustrated in Figure 1, they include Universalistic, Liberal, Employment-Centered, Sub-Protective, and Post-Communist country clusters.

Based on these theoretical foundations, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. The well-being of NEET (15- to 34-year-old) individuals will be lower than that of non-NEET youth, but also this will differ in significant ways amongst specific sub-categories (employed versus student; unemployed; not in the labour force, education or training [NLFET]; or engaged in unpaid care work) across country contexts, with NLFET youth showing the greatest SWB 'penalty'.

Hypothesis 2. NEET youth, and most particularly NLFET youth, will fare better in absolute terms in country contexts where more comprehensive social protections are available, such as the Universalistic and Employment-Centred countries.

Hypothesis 3. Relative inequalities between NEET and non-NEET sub-groups will be minimized in country contexts where prolonged school-to-work transitions are the norm and where the 'familialization' of welfare is dominant, such as the Sub-Protective and Post-Communist countries.

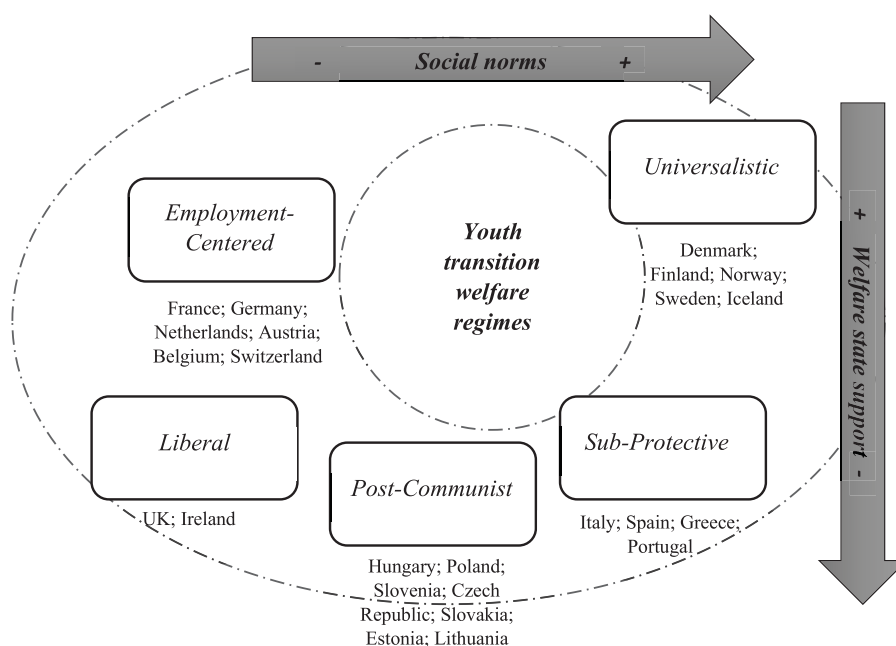


Figure 1. Theoretical groupings based on welfare state support and social norms regarding entries into adulthood.

2. Methods

In a preliminary descriptive analysis, we briefly compare rates of NEET statuses, including youth who are unemployed, NLFET, or engaged in unpaid care work, among these contexts. Next, we utilize our measure of quality of life – self-reported SWB – in order to test our postulates regarding the well-being of these disengaged youth among countries, mobilizing multilevel regression models. These econometric analyses use pooled ESS data from all eight consecutive waves (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016).

2.1 Defining who are NEET

Based on the research of Serracant (2014) and others, we propose that the conceptual breadth of the NEET category as it is currently put into practice makes theoretical conclusions and policy recommendations difficult. Often, measures of youth well-being are only compared between NEET and non-NEET youth, sometimes by gender and age, but rarely within specific sub-categories of NEET youth. Thus, in order to do so, we deconstruct the NEET versus non-NEET categories into five separate groups – those who are employed, those who are in full-time education, those who are unemployed, those who are ‘not in the labour force, education or training’ (NLFET), and those who are engaged in full-time unpaid care work in the home – in order to uncover potential differences between these five qualitatively different types of statuses for youth. We first run analyses using the broader NEET versus non-NEET distinction and show how these results differ within the sub-categories across regimes.

2.2 Measuring subjective well-being

Our measure of SWB is created from existing ESS items. To do so, we create index scores from the responses of the entire ESS sample. We combine self-reported life satisfaction and levels of happiness using two ESS items that align with the theoretical concept of ‘subjective well-being’ (Diener et al. 2010). The two items used are (1) How satisfied are you with your life as a whole on a scale of zero to 10? and (2) How happy are you on a scale of zero to 10? These two items have a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.83. The index scores were created using a polychoric correlation matrix and Bartlett’s scoring on the complete sample. Scores ranged from zero to 12.72 with an average of 9.19 and a standard deviation of 2.38 for the complete sample, and an average of 9.56 for youth aged 15–34 with a standard deviation of 2.19.

Next, in order to capture a relative measure of well-being, we created standardized z-scores within countries to account for overall differences in average reported well-being levels amongst countries. To do so, we used the index scores for SWB. Mean-centering is performed by subtracting the average score of all individuals in the country (of all ages, from 15 to 85 years old) from each individual’s score. To standardize the scores, these mean-centred scores are then divided by the standard deviation of all scores within the country (a z-score). These scores are thus relative to country average scores on this measure of SWB and take into account differences in the overall distribution of perceived well-being across countries. For the descriptive analyses, we present both the raw index

scores and the standardized scores. We use the standardized scores as the dependent variables in the regression analyses, thus showing effects on youth's *relative* SWB.

2.3 Survey data and modeling

Since 2002, the ESS has measured cross-national attitudes, values, and beliefs within the European Union every two years. The ESS is a face-to-face survey that includes detailed questions on personal and social well-being, along with socio-demographic information, including employment and education statuses. This study uses all available rounds (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016) of the ESS.¹ The population targeted by the ESS is all non-institutionalized individuals age 15 and over regardless of their legal status, nationality, and language, and a sampling strategy using a strict random probability design ensures the representativeness of the sample. To limit ourselves to those who are or could hypothetically be NEET, we limit our analysis to respondents aged 15–34 during the survey period. In compliance with ESS guidelines, we apply post-stratification and population size weights in all analyses (ESS 2014). The post-stratification weight corrects for within-country non-response bias due to age, gender, education, and region, while the population size weight corrects for differing population sizes in a cross-national analysis. ESS data and documentation are freely available online (ESS 2012).

As described above, our dependent variable of interest is perceived well-being as captured by subjective psychological well-being (SWB). Descriptive analyses are conducted for the European sample as a whole and separately for each of the five regime groupings described earlier. Following these preliminary analyses, we utilize three-level random intercept models. Our multilevel regression analyses model the well-being of these youth as a function of their status in terms of developing their human capital (in employment, in education, unemployed, NLFET, or engaged in unpaid care work in the home) and as a function of individual characteristics (age group, gender, living with a partner, children, immigration background, father's unemployment at age 14,² and income level), while incorporating country of residence and survey round at levels two and three in our econometric models. This has been suggested as best practice when using these types of data (Schmidt-Catran and Fairbrother 2016; Gebel et al. 2018).

3. Results

3.1 NEET rates across countries and regime groupings in Europe

First, we explore trends in NEET rates across countries and our regime groupings in order to compare the prevalence of various NEET statuses across Europe. NEET rates overall are highest in the Liberal and Sub-Protective countries, while the Universalistic and Employment-Centered countries show the lowest overall rates. However, when we examine these rates within sub-categories of NEET statuses, we see that these are driven by different statuses in different regimes. The high NEET rate is mainly accounted for by high rates of unemployment in the Sub-Protective countries, while it is also driven by high rates of unpaid care work in the Liberal countries (see Figure 2). Higher rates are also driven by unpaid caregiving activities in the Post-Communist countries. Employment-Centered and Universalistic countries show similar trends in terms of having low rates of

unemployment but differ in that there are higher rates of unpaid care work in the Employment-Centered as compared to the Universalistic countries. Across all countries in Europe, we see fairly comparable rates of NLFET across most countries as averaged over the period 2002–2016, although Belgium and Iceland stand out with higher percentages (see [Table A1](#) in Appendix A).

The differences in NEET rates by gender are striking. Women report NEET statuses much more often than men across regimes. However, on closer examination we see that these differences are due almost entirely to young women who are outside of the labour force and education and training due to full-time unpaid caregiving activities in the home (see [Figure A1](#) and [Figure A2](#) in Appendix A). Indeed, rates of unemployment and NLFET are fairly similar for young women and men. When we examine the data by gender and age (not shown), we find that rates of NEET status increase with age across regime groupings, and that this is particularly pronounced for women aged 30–34. Within this oldest age group, caregiving roles are reported most often in the Liberal and Post-Communist groupings, while the lowest rates are found in the Universalistic countries.

3.2 Subjective well-being of NEET youth across countries and regime groupings

Next, we move beyond rates of NEET status to examine the well-being of NEET youth. Beginning with a simple descriptive analysis, we see that non-NEET individuals report significantly higher SWB than NEET individuals, on average almost half of a standard deviation higher (see [Figure 3](#)). Notably, we see that these differences are fairly consistent across regime contexts. This remains true when we examine the standardized scores (see [Figure 4](#)), which are relative to the overall samples in each country. However, we see that the positions of these groups on the axis by regime grouping have now changed: While youth in the Universalistic regime report the highest raw scores in terms of well-being, their scores are low relative to the other members of the population

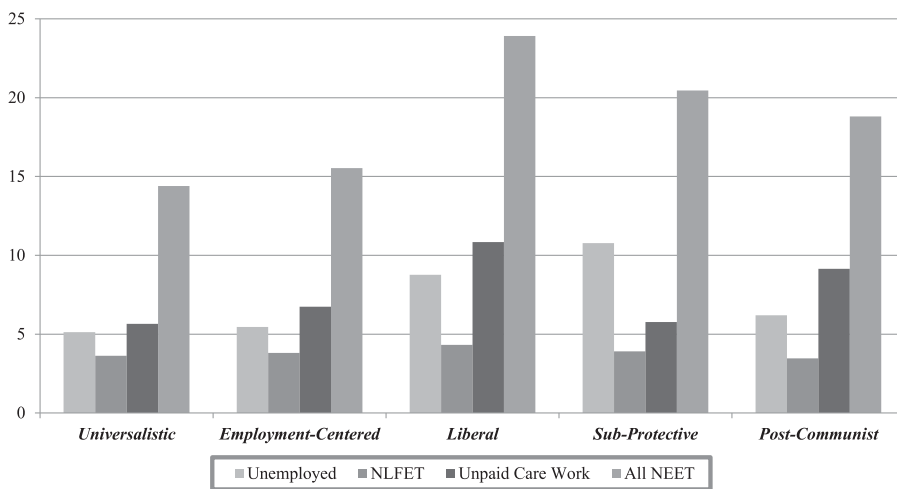


Figure 2. Percentage of young people by NEET status and regime grouping. Source: European Social Survey (ESS), 2002–2016.

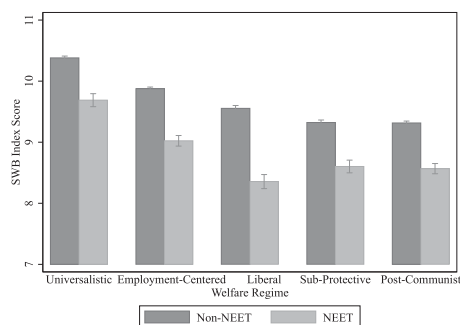


Figure 3. SWB scores by NEET status and welfare regime. Source: European Social Survey (ESS), 2002-2016.

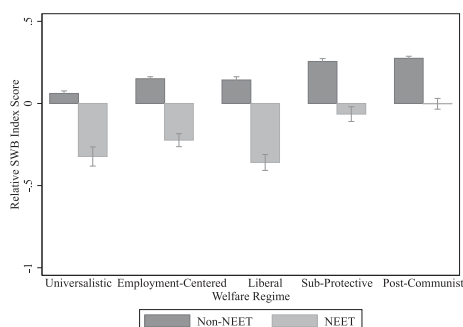


Figure 4. Relative SWB scores by NEET status and welfare regime. Source: European Social Survey (ESS), 2002-2016.

of their country overall. However, these differences between NEET and non-NEET groups may mask underlying differences within these two large categories of individuals. Next, we break down the NEET distinction into specific sub-groups.

When looking at specific activity statuses, we see that those who are engaged in unpaid care work clearly report higher well-being than those who are unemployed or NLFET (see Figure 5). These differences depend on the gender of the individual: Men

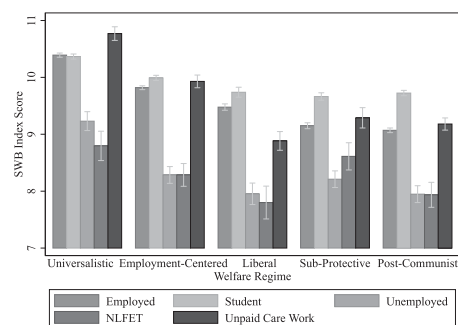


Figure 5. SWB scores by NEET sub-group and regime. Source: European Social Survey (ESS), 2002-2016.

who are engaged in unpaid care work report comparable well-being to those who are unemployed or NLFET, while women who are unpaid caregivers in the home report significantly higher levels of well-being than other NEET individuals (not shown). However, the vast majority of full-time caregivers are women (94% across all countries). Employed youth and students report comparable levels of SWB, higher than the average level of SWB in their country overall (see Figure 6). Both unemployed and NLFET individuals report significantly lower SWB than the other three sub-groups, in both absolute and relative terms.

In terms of welfare contexts, those living in Universalistic countries report the highest well-being overall, while those in the Post-Communist countries report the lowest. However, when we examine relative scores, which are the standardized score for each country (calculated by subtracting the country average score for the whole population from the individual's score and dividing by the standard deviation), the differences in reported SWB between average members of the population and NEET youth are actually *largest* in Universalistic contexts (without controls). Furthermore, when we compare rates across youth activity statuses (see Figure 6), we see that differences amongst youth are also largest in Universalistic contexts. In contrast, in line with our hypotheses regarding the effects of social norms and familialization on inequalities in well-being, we see that the smallest differences in reported SWB between those who are employed and those who are unemployed or NLFET are found in Sub-Protective contexts. This is also true for NEET youth as compared to the population at large. However, these findings are simply descriptive and do not consider other individual characteristics.

3.3. Predicting well-being outcomes by NEET statuses

Our main research interest is to examine how young adults' well-being varies with their NEET status and the ways in which regime contexts shape this relationship. We predicted that inequalities in well-being between NEET and non-NEET youth will depend strongly on the welfare regime context. Using regression models, we explore this possibility both by comparing the impact of NEET statuses on well-being across regime contexts and by testing these effects parametrically using interaction terms. These models use the *relative* SWB index score as the dependent variable, in order to take into account differences in average levels of perceived well-being across countries.³

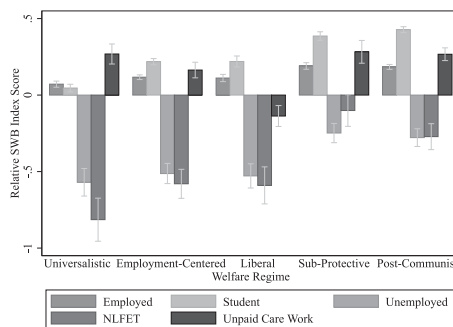


Figure 6. Relative SWB scores by NEET sub-group and regime. Source: European Social Survey (ESS), 2002-2016.

3.3.1. Well-being across countries

First, we examine the effects of NEET statuses on SWB across the pooled sample of all 24 European countries in our sample with controls. We begin by examining effects using the simple NEET versus non-NEET distinction (see Table A2, Model 1, in Appendix A). We see that NEET status shows the expected strong significant negative effect on our measure of well-being. Control variables also show the expected effects: Being a woman is associated with higher reported SWB, *ceteris paribus*. Older individuals report lower SWB than those under the age of 25. Living with a partner has positive effects on SWB, as does having children. Income, as measured by three-decile relative income brackets (within countries), has a strongly significant positive effect on well-being.

When we examine the effects of NEET sub-category statuses (see Table A3, Model 1 in Appendix A), we see that both unemployment and NLFET statuses clearly still have a strong significant negative effect on well-being as compared to the population within the country as a whole. However, unpaid care work in the home does not have a significant negative effect SWB. Thus, this sub-category of NEET status does not appear to be detrimental to well-being as measured by the relative SWB index score.

3.3.2. Well-being across welfare regimes

Examining our relative measure of SWB, we see that both being unemployed and being NLFET have strong significant negative effects on reported well-being across all contexts (see Figure 7 and Figure 8). Surprisingly, these effects are shown to be *largest* in the Universalistic countries, where NEET rates are low. As we saw in the descriptive statistics

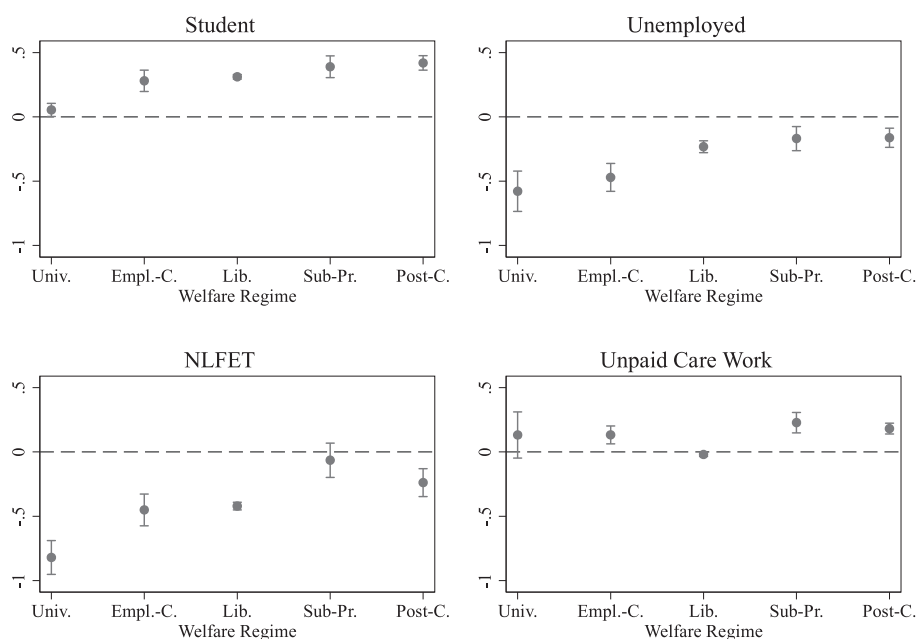


Figure 7. Predicted relative SWB index score of youth by NEET status and welfare regime. Source: European Social Survey (ESS), 2002–2016.

Note: Multilevel regression analyses with country-years at level 2 and countries at level 3. Weights applied in all analyses. Controls included for gender, age, living with a partner, children, immigration status, income level, and father's unemployment.

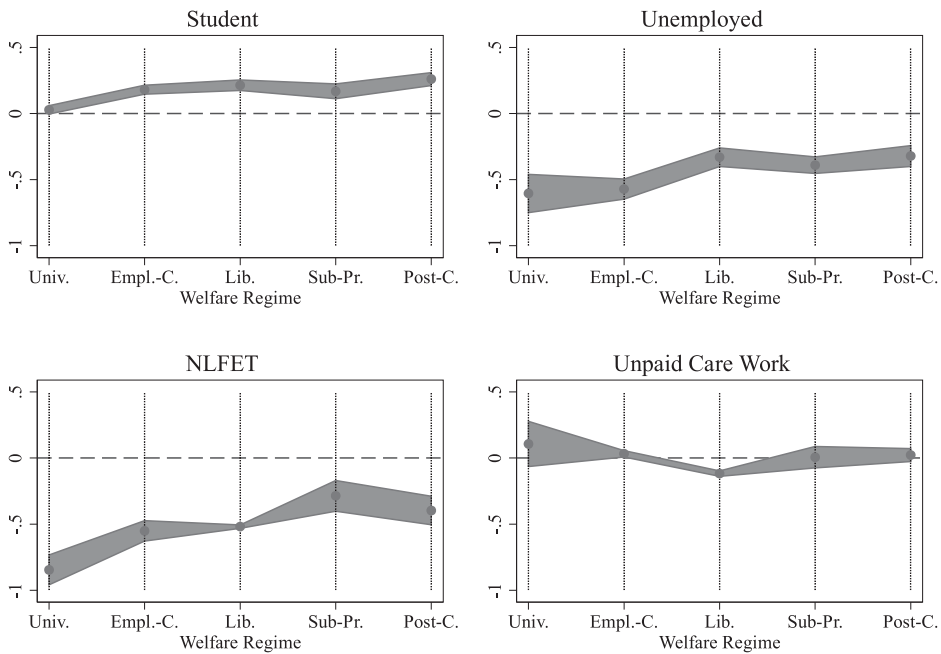


Figure 8. Marginal effects of NEET status and welfare regime on relative SWB index score. Source: European Social Survey (ESS), 2002–2016.

Note: Multilevel regression analyses with country-years at level 2 and countries at level 3. Weights applied in all analyses. Controls included for gender, age, living with a partner, children, immigration status, income level, and father's unemployment.

earlier, both being unemployed and being NLFET are linked with lower well-being as compared to the population within the country as a whole across all regime contexts, while those engaged in full-time unpaid care work do not report lower comparative well-being. These two sub-categories thus account for the negative effects of the larger NEET category, masking the contrasting effects of unpaid care work.

This is consistent across contexts, with the partial exception of unpaid care work in the Liberal countries and unemployment in the Employment-Centered countries. Interaction terms by NEET status and regime context show that the size of the negative effects are significantly weaker for NLFET youth in all regime contexts other than the Universalistic countries, and for unemployed youth in Liberal, Sub-Protective, and Post-Communist contexts. Thus, these youth show higher well-being scores as compared to the population within the country as a whole. Since these contexts also show the highest overall levels of NEET category membership and comparatively lengthier entries into adulthood, these findings are consistent with our hypothesis that when NEET statuses become a social norm, its negative effects are mitigated.

Unpaid care work only has a significant negative impact on SWB in the Liberal context: As seen in Figure 8, this effect is significantly more negative than in the Universalistic context (or any other context). This may be due to the fact that, in Ireland and the UK, a key group composing the NEET category is young – often teenaged – mothers. These young women face multiple risk factors, and may often also find themselves ‘directed

into inappropriate education and training courses based on their ‘young unemployed mother’ status rather than encouraged to embark upon an individualized pathway relevant to their particular needs and career aspirations’ (Russell 2016, 91). This, combined with weaker welfare state supports and social norms promoting earlier financial independence from the family, may drive this particular finding [Figures 7 and 8](#).

On the other hand, being a student as compared to being employed as one’s main activity is associated with significantly more positive effects in all regimes other than the Universalistic. While young students and workers report similar SWB in the Universalistic countries, students report significantly higher SWB as compared to the population within the country as a whole in all other contexts. This is consistent with research on social norms in early adulthood that focuses on cross-national differences in higher educational pathways and the paradox of choice, which can sometimes be detrimental to well-being (Charles 2016; Schwartz 2004). We also see an independent negative impact of age group on SWB (see [Table A2](#) in Appendix A). Consistent with existing research, well-being decreases with age after the age of 25.

3.5 Robustness checks

These models were rerun using multiple model specifications to ensure that the interaction effects were robust to differing model constructions using fixed and random effects (Schmidt-Catran and Fairbrother 2016). We found that the significant interaction terms were robust to model specifications incorporating country, year, and country-year random effects in two- and three-level models. Consistent with the findings outlined above, the interaction terms remain significant, showing that the well-being gap between employed and unemployed or NLFET individuals is significantly larger in Universalistic countries than in all of the other regime groupings.

4. Discussion

This study found that levels of well-being are lower for NEET youth across contexts, with important differences by NEET sub-category and welfare regime. Specifically, unemployed and NLFET youth show significantly lower SWB than those who are employed, while those engaged in unpaid care work generally do not. This drives us to question the utility of the larger, all-encompassing NEET category. This binary focus is based on ‘a conception of social exclusion in which the central policy focus is on moving young people across a boundary between participation and non-participation, and inequalities within education and employment receive less attention’ (Thompson 2011, 785). However, a vague definition of what constitutes NEET statuses may even be intentional and useful to governments: By placing dissimilar youth together, they can make apparent improvements while only addressing the easiest and most superficial problems of a select part of this group, and sweeping the rest of more systemic and hard-to-solve problems under the rug. In the same vein, exits from NEET status cannot be considered as universal ‘good news’: Research does not find that ‘any job is better than no job’ in terms of future prospects or well-being (Voßemer et al. 2018).

We predicted that NEET youth would fare better in absolute terms in country contexts where more comprehensive social protections are available, such as the Universalistic and

Employment-Centred regimes, and our results supported these predictions. We also suggested that the differences between NEET and non-NEET sub-groups would be minimized in country contexts where prolonged school-to-work transitions are the norm and where the ‘familialization’ of welfare is dominant. Only partly supporting this hypothesis, we found that the magnitude of differences varied significantly between welfare regimes, with those who are unemployed and NLFET in Universalistic regime countries reporting the largest ‘penalties’ in terms of relative well-being. This finding is somewhat surprising, given the purported ‘universalism’ at play in social policies in these contexts, but can be explained by several important factors.

Firstly, active labour market policies (ALMP) and ‘workfare’ approaches have been implemented to a great extent in the countries included in our Universalistic grouping. Policies in these countries shifted over the 1990s from an approach centred on ‘empowering’ and ‘human capital investment’ to a more narrow understanding of flexicurity emphasizing ‘make work pay’ and ‘work first’ orientations, leading to ‘a gradual erosion of benefits’ (Kvist and Greve 2011, 148). For example, in Denmark during the 1990s ‘benefits for unemployed and active labour market programmes got linked under the label “activation”’, these benefits became conditional on taking part in activation programmes, the benefit period was halved from four to two years, and benefit levels were lowered for young people on social assistance (Kvist and Greve 2011, 151). Furthermore, a new and less generous benefit was introduced for immigrants coming to the country who would previously have been entitled to social assistance (Kvist and Greve 2011). Indeed, since the 1990s, inequality in these countries has increased (Jochem 2011).

The efficiency of active labour market policies is a topic of widespread debate across the OECD countries. Active labour market policies have been criticized for intervening in the wage bargaining process and strengthening ‘revolving door effects as participants of active labour market schemes re-enter unemployment schemes after further training’ (Jochem 2011, 139). Furthermore, it has been found that ‘ALMPs that focus on youth are less effective than those aimed at the whole population’ (Gama, Saget, and Eyraud 2015, 64). The reasons for the poor performance of youth programs is not clear: Some authors suggest that it is because long-term unemployed youth generally have low qualifications and low skills, making them ‘a very disadvantaged group and may thus be difficult to assist’ (Jochem 2011, 19). Supporting this notion, it has been found that the negative effects of unemployment on the well-being of unemployed adults increase in countries with higher ALMP expenditures (Voßemer et al. 2018; Högberg, Strandh, and Baranowska-Rataj 2019).

Another factor that may explain these findings is purely statistical: One can argue that a smaller group will always be more different from the general population than a larger group. As Hammer contends, ‘in countries with low unemployment, unemployed youth may be a highly selected group with other problems in addition to being jobless’ (Hammer 2000, 54). Thus, since the Universalistic countries show the lowest NEET rates and thus the smallest NEET samples, the larger differences may simply be a ‘mathematical artefact’. This may sometimes be true, but is not a mathematical certainty (Mackenbach 2017).

On the other hand, this relates to the third potential factor, which is the idea of a ‘social norm’ that accepts prolonged entries into adulthood and periods of time spent in NEET statuses. This is the idea that if more people share these experiences, it is less harmful to one’s well-being. This has been shown to be the case in terms of adult unemployment

(Clark 2003; Chen and Hou 2019; Stavrova, Schlösser, and Fetchenhauer 2011). When unemployment rates are very high 'unemployment may be regarded by society as a common and less stigmatized phenomenon, which in turn may moderate the individual's feeling of depression and low self-esteem' (Hammer 2000, 54). However, this cannot be limited to the NEET rate alone: Country-level controls for the overall rate of NEET status by country are not significant in the models, nor do they affect the significance of the interaction effects. This suggests that it is not merely a function of the quantity of NEET youth, but also of the societal injunctive norms (what people 'should' do) related to NEET statuses. This has been shown to be the case for adult unemployment, where these injunctive norms have been shown to be more important than actual descriptive norms in terms of overall levels of unemployment in a country (Stavrova, Schlösser, and Fetchenhauer 2011). We are unaware of any studies investigating these injunctive norms specifically for youth.

Furthermore, these social norms are also gendered, and likely much more so in some institutional contexts than others (Boeckmann, Misra, and Budig 2015; Antonini et al. 2020). In our own findings, the relatively positive situation of young women in unpaid caring roles in terms of well-being can clearly not be seen as an unqualified positive effect from the point of view of gender equality. These young women's longer-term opportunities for finding fulfilment and well-being in multiple life spheres may well be undermined by this same status that provides short-term well-being advantages. This gendered nature of youth transitions is not sufficiently acknowledged either in research or in social policy and remains an important area of future research.

5. Conclusion

In summary, we proposed that both overall levels and inequalities in well-being between NEET and non-NEET youth would depend strongly on both the universality and comprehensiveness of social benefits and on the rapidity and rigidity of the organization of transitions into adulthood, with absolute levels depending more so on the first and relative inequalities on the second. Our hypotheses were only partly supported. In terms of overall rates of NEET status, we see that rates are lowest where welfare supports are highest, while no such clear pattern emerges for social norms. Absolute levels of SWB by youth sub-group are highest in the Universalistic countries, where the welfare state is more extensive, but ALMP is high. However, relative *inequalities* between NEET and non-NEET youth are also highest in these same contexts. Indeed, the effects of unemployment and NLFET statuses on SWB are most pronounced in the Universalistic countries, and these youth report the lowest relative well-being as compared to the rest of the national sample. Thus, while the Nordic countries are typically praised for their inclusive welfare arrangements, when it comes to youth – and particularly those youth who are not developing their human capital in any way – it appears that these contexts are in fact more detrimental than any other. Our results are consistent with previous research suggesting that the generosity of welfare benefits does not lessen the negative impacts of unemployment and inactivity on well-being (Ervasti and Venetoklis 2010). Rather, our findings would appear to provide some support for the hypothesis of the importance of social norms towards employment in the effect of unemployment and NLFET statuses on well-being (Clark 2003; Stavrova, Schlösser, and Fetchenhauer 2011).

These results represent an important extension of research on adult unemployment to the specific case of NEET youth in Europe and suggest the need for further research focused on this key policy-constructed sub-population. Overall, our findings concerning the psychological outcomes associated with different NEET sub-categories, as well as inequalities in SWB across contexts, offer important insights for the study of social inequalities more generally, highlighting the association between education and labour market integration, social norms, and perceived well-being.

Notes

1. In robustness checks, we compared results between the period leading up the Great Recession and following it, in order to look for any changes that may have taken place over time, but the results were similar. These analyses are available upon request.
2. Neither mother's nor father's highest level of education was significant, and so neither were included in the models. This is consistent with prior research on the well-being of unemployed youth (Hammer 2000, 59).
3. Models regressing NEET statuses on the raw SWB index scores showed similar, although not identical results, and are available upon request.

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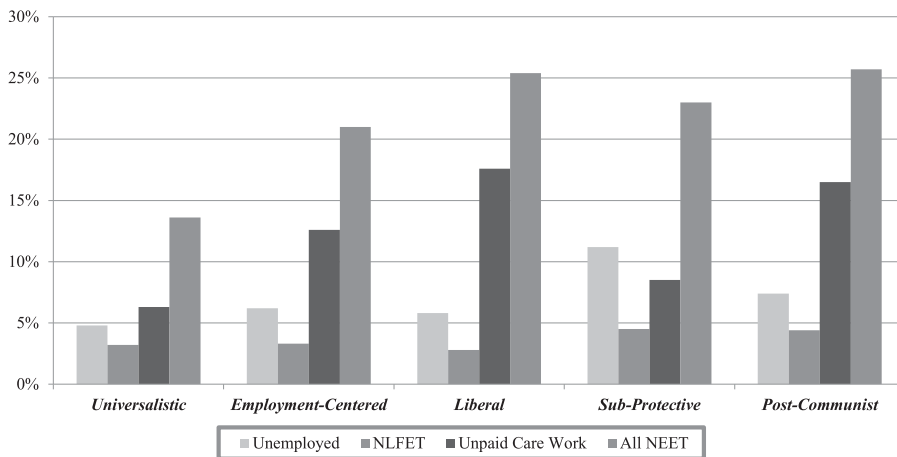
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APPENDIX A

Table A1. Percentage of young people by NEET status, country, and regime grouping.

Regime Grouping	Country	Unemployed	NLFET	Unpaid Care Work	All NEET
Universalistic	Denmark	5.76	3.08	7.53	16.35
	Finland	4.58	2.52	6.17	13.27
	Iceland	5.53	6.26	8.01	19.80
	Norway	4.01	3.35	5.08	12.44
	Sweden	5.74	2.90	1.47	10.11
	Average	5.12	3.62	5.65	14.39
Employment-Centered	Austria	4.43	2.25	6.62	13.30
	Belgium	6.49	7.32	3.79	14.80
	France	8.44	3.76	5.51	17.71
	Germany	5.76	3.06	7.53	16.35
	Netherlands	3.84	4.40	8.77	17.00
	Switzerland	3.72	2.04	8.22	13.98
Liberal	Average	5.45	3.81	6.74	15.52
	Ireland	10.74	4.46	9.86	25.05
	United Kingdom	6.80	4.19	11.80	22.78
Sub-Protective	Average	8.77	4.33	10.83	23.92
	Greece	10.10	3.94	11.66	25.70
	Italy	13.45	4.17	3.86	21.48
	Portugal	8.71	2.95	3.15	14.82
	Spain	10.84	4.57	4.39	19.79
Post-Communist	Average	10.78	3.91	5.77	20.45
	Czech Republic	5.03	2.50	10.61	18.15
	Estonia	4.47	2.81	8.75	16.03
	Hungary	5.86	4.09	10.48	20.43
	Lithuania	4.79	2.55	10.79	18.13
	Poland	8.22	4.12	8.02	20.37
	Slovakia	8.26	3.99	11.96	24.21
	Slovenia	6.72	4.21	3.38	14.31
	Average	6.19	3.47	9.14	18.80

Source: European Social Survey (ESS), 2002-2016.

**Figure A1.** Percentage of young women by NEET status and regime grouping. Source: European Social Survey (ESS), 2002-2016.

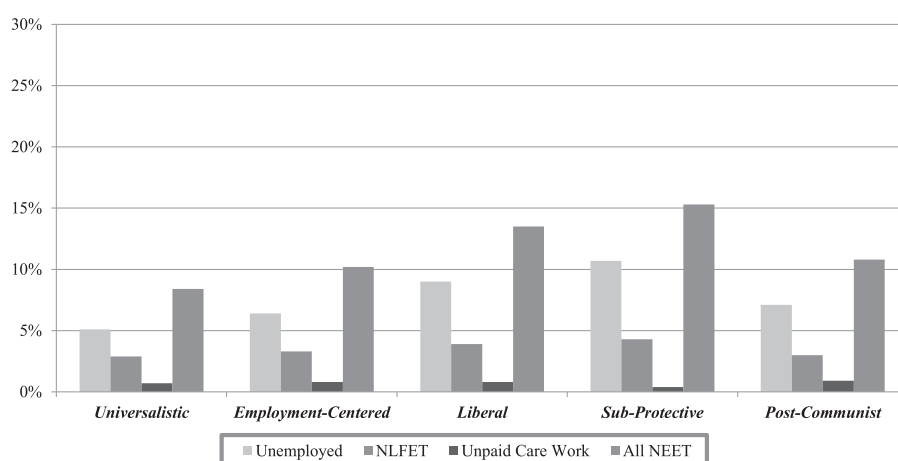


Figure A2. Percentage of young men by NEET status and regime grouping. Source: European Social Survey (ESS), 2002–2016.

Table A2. Multilevel models regressing NEET status on relative SWB index score.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
Non-NEET			<i>Reference category</i>	
NEET	−0.352***	(0.021)	−0.459***	(0.113)
Gender (fem.)	0.062***	(0.009)	0.062***	(0.009)
Oldest (>25)	−0.258***	(0.021)	−0.258***	(0.021)
Living with partner	0.268***	(0.013)	0.268***	(0.013)
Children	0.037 ⁺	(0.020)	0.037 ⁺	(0.020)
Immigrant	−0.051 ⁺	(0.026)	−0.049 ⁺	(0.026)
Father unemployed	−0.106***	(0.014)	−0.106***	(0.013)
Low income			<i>Reference category</i>	
Middle income	0.195***	(0.021)	0.194***	(0.021)
High income	0.357***	(0.021)	0.356***	(0.021)
Missing income	0.213***	(0.020)	0.211***	(0.021)
Universalistic			<i>Reference category</i>	
Employment-Centered			0.126**	(0.044)
Liberal			0.128***	(0.024)
Sub-Protective			0.245***	(0.034)
Post-Communist			0.220***	(0.026)
Non-NEET × Universalistic			<i>Reference categories</i>	
Non-NEET × Employment-Centered				
Non-NEET × Liberal				
Non-NEET × Sub-Protective				
Non-NEET × Post-Communist				
NEET × Universalistic				
NEET × Employment-Centered			0.072	(0.116)
NEET × Liberal			0.119	(0.114)
NEET × Sub-Protective			0.119	(0.115)
NEET × Post-Communist			0.179	(0.116)
Intercept	−0.003	(0.031)	−0.152***	(0.025)
Variance (Intercept)	0.098***	(0.015)	0.041***	(0.017)
Variance Level 3 (Country-Year)	0.096***	(0.011)	0.096***	(0.011)
Variance Level 2 (Country)	0.893***	(0.007)	0.893***	(0.007)
N	83504		83504	

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; ⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table A3. Multilevel models regressing NEET sub-categories on relative SWB index score.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
Employed			<i>Reference category</i>	
Student	0.185***	(0.017)	0.028 ⁺	(0.016)
Unemployed	−0.442***	(0.048)	−0.604***	(0.074)
NLFET	−0.472***	(0.036)	−0.846***	(0.058)
Unpaid care	−0.006	(0.025)	0.106	(0.087)
Gender (fem.)	0.022**	(0.007)	0.023**	(0.007)
Oldest (>25)	−0.176***	(0.022)	−0.174***	(0.023)
Living with partner	0.286***	(0.015)	0.285***	(0.015)
Children	−0.022	(0.017)	−0.019	(0.016)
Immigrant	−0.058*	(0.027)	−0.058*	(0.027)
Father unemployed	−0.101***	(0.014)	−0.099***	(0.014)
Low income			<i>Reference category</i>	
Middle income	0.194***	(0.023)	0.190***	(0.023)
High income	0.356***	(0.023)	0.353***	(0.022)
Missing income	0.195***	(0.020)	0.192***	(0.020)
Universalistic			<i>Reference category</i>	
Employment-Centered			0.075*	(0.032)
Liberal			0.072***	(0.019)
Sub-Protective			0.196***	(0.029)
Post-Communist			0.133***	(0.019)
Employed × Universalistic				
Employed × Employment-Centered				
Employed × Liberal				
Employed × Sub-Protective			<i>Reference categories</i>	
Employed × Post-Communist				
Student × Universalistic				
Student × Employment-Centered			0.152***	(0.023)
Student × Liberal			0.186***	(0.016)
Student × Sub-Protective			0.140***	(0.031)
Student × Post-Communist			0.232***	(0.027)
Unemployed × Universalistic			<i>Reference category</i>	
Unemployed × Employment-Centered			0.033	(0.083)
Unemployed × Liberal			0.275***	(0.082)
Unemployed × Sub-Protective			0.214**	(0.079)
Unemployed × Post-Communist			0.283***	(0.084)
NLFET × Universalistic			<i>Reference category</i>	
NLFET × Employment-Centered			0.295***	(0.071)
NLFET × Liberal			0.327***	(0.058)
NLFET × Sub-Protective			0.560***	(0.080)
NLFET × Post-Communist			0.449***	(0.079)
Unpaid Care × Universalistic			<i>Reference category</i>	
Unpaid Care × Employment-Centered			−0.074	(0.087)
Unpaid Care × Liberal			−0.224**	(0.087)
Unpaid Care × Sub-Protective			−0.100	(0.096)
Unpaid Care × Post-Communist			−0.084	(0.090)
Intercept	−0.079*	(0.033)	−0.171***	(0.026)
Variance (Intercept)	0.101***	(0.016)	0.041***	(0.018)
Variance Level 3 (Country-Year)	0.095***	(0.011)	0.096***	(0.011)
Variance Level 2 (Country)	0.886***	(0.007)	0.885***	(0.007)
N	83504		83504	

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; ⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.