



# Exploring and Expanding the Category of ‘Young Workers’ According to Situated Ways of Doing Risk and Safety—a Case Study in the Retail Industry

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## ABSTRACT

Young adult workers aged 18–24 years have the highest risk of accidents at work. Following the work of Bourdieu and Tannock, we demonstrate that young adult workers are a highly differentiated group. Accordingly, safety prevention among young adult workers needs to be nuanced in ways that take into consideration the different positions and conditions under which young adult workers are employed. Based on single and group interviews with 26 young adult workers from six various sized supermarkets, we categorize young adult retail workers into the following five distinct groups: ‘Skilled workers,’ ‘Apprentices,’ ‘Sabbatical year workers,’ ‘Student workers,’ and ‘School dropouts.’ We argue that exposure to accidental risk is not equally distributed among them and offer an insight into the narratives of young adult workers on the subject of risk situations at work. The categorizations are explored and expanded according to the situated ways of ‘doing’ risk and safety in the working practices of the adult workers. We suggest that the understanding of ‘young’ as an age-related biological category might explain why approaches to prevent accidents among young employees first and foremost include individual factors like advice, information, and supervision and to a lesser degree the structural and cultural environment wherein they are embedded. We conclude that age cannot stand alone as the only factor in safety prevention directed at workers aged 18–24 years; if we do so, there is a risk of overemphasizing age-related individual characteristics such as awareness and cognitive limitations before structural, relational, and hierarchical dimensions at the workplace.

## KEY WORDS

Age / doing safety / categories of youth workers / positioning / safety promotion / supermarkets / youth / qualitative study

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## Introduction

### Why is the safety of young adult workers interesting?

Young adult workers aged 18–24 years have the highest risk of accident/injury (Breslin et al. 2007; Rasmussen et al. 2011; Salminen 2004) and account for more than 700,000 serious accidents in Europe each year (Eurostat 2007). The increased risk of work accidents among young adults is often assigned to their individual characteristics (Chau et al. 2004, 2007). Young workers' experience and cognitive abilities are often perceived as less developed and, in particular for men, are characterized by a perception of invulnerability (Barker et al. 1996; Hargreaves & Davies 1996).

On the other hand, a Canadian retrospective study (Breslin et al. 2007a, b) has challenged this assumption, arguing that young adult workers' increased risk of accidents is more due to the type of work they are assigned and the type of working conditions they work under.

A recent Danish study (Rasmussen et al. 2011) found that most Danish adolescents in the 15- to 19 year age group had decent working conditions, although nearly half reported that their work was heavy, monotonous, or psychologically demanding. The study also found that heavy work, high psychological demands, and low social support increase the risk of experiencing work accidents.

The categorization of 'young workers' on the basis of age seems to be widespread in research (Barker et al. 1996; Breslin et al. 2007; Chau et al. 2004, 2007; Hargreaves & Davies 1996; Rasmussen et al. 2011) as well as in youth work policy (The Danish Ministry of Employment 2010) and in safety prevention and safety campaigns directed toward young workers (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work 2007, 2009). Here young adult workers are frequently treated as a single group with the same positions and conditions on the labor market and with common interests. One reason for this is that age, like gender, is an easy and available category that in some cases can provide a proxy category for 'young workers'; yet, it also risks overemphasizing the importance of biological age in risk and accident research. The category 'youth' is loaded with meanings of lack of experience, training, and awareness and with cognitive limitations and risk-taking behavior that often becomes the primary explanatory factors related to the increased risk of accidents in this group. This understanding of 'youth' as an age-related biological category might explain the widespread acceptance that accident prevention targeting young adult workers must necessarily involve individual factors like advice, information, training, and supervision and to a lesser degree, focus on the structural and cultural environments wherein they are embedded. This is not to argue that the former are not important for understanding risks at work, but understanding 'youth' alone as a matter of biological age may be too simplistic in explaining the background for young adult workers' increased risk of work accidents.

### The aim of the article

The aim of this article is twofold. First, we demonstrate that the definition of 'youth' as a biological age category cannot stand alone when trying to prevent work accidents among young adult workers. Second, we develop a categorization of young

adult workers that offers a better insight into the societal differentiation in education and the structural and cultural environments that employ young adult workers. The retail industry is taken as a case.

### **Why retail industry?**

We chose the retail industry, as in many countries this sector employs a broad variety of young adults, male and female, and thus covers the main groups of young adults relevant for the present article (Hendricks & Layne 1999). In the 1950s, technology made much child labor redundant, both in Denmark and in the rest of the Western world (Coninck-Smith 2005). However, through the second half of the 20th century, this development also led to a situation where children and young people got access to jobs that adults no longer wanted and they were often employed in temporary or seasonal work, in low-status service jobs, and in the retail industry (Greenberger & Steinberg 1986; Tannock 2003).

Tannock writes about this kind of work:

“The kind of tasks that comprise low-end service work have long been seen as low in status, value and skill- and, in fact, unlike even the most menial forms of agriculture and industrial labour, as hardly even constituting ‘real’ work. Such tasks, consequently, have historically been consigned to those groups who are most disempowered and marginalized: women, minorities, immigrants, as well as children and youth.” (Tannock 2003, 289)

It is still very common among Danish young adults to have an after-school job (Brown et al. 2009a, b; Coninck-Smith 2005; Fridberg 1999; Hansen 2003; Junge-Jensen and Andersen 1995; Jørgensen et al. 1986). We have chosen to focus on retail, because retail traditionally has employed many Danish adolescents (Rafnsdóttir 1999).

One of the reasons why young people largely work in the retail area is that it is geographically accessible to them (Kouvonen 2001; Tannock 2001, 2003). A Nordic survey showed that 14% of the Danish respondents between 13 and 17 years old were working in shops or supermarkets (Rafnsdóttir 1999, 31). This survey also showed that young adults often start to work in retail and the (fast) food industry when they are between 15 and 17 years old (Rafnsdóttir 1999, 32), and it is often their first ‘real job’ outside the home in a workplace. The same pattern is found among Swedish and Norwegian adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 years. Upon turning 18, many of them continue to work in the retail industry while continuing their education. A few receive an education in retail, while others leave school after mandatory schooling (varies from country to country) and continue to work in unskilled retail jobs. Therefore, retail provides a relevant sector for this study, as it represents a high variety of young adult workers and phases of their life trajectories.

### **Method and theory**

We carried out qualitative on-site interviews and observations in six supermarkets. The supermarkets were selected through contact with the primary actors in the supermarkets,



and included both small (between 20 and 30 employees) and large (more than 150 employees) supermarkets, which employed at least ten young adult workers between the ages of 18 and 24 years. Both traditional supermarkets and discount supermarkets were included—and whose assortment of goods included, e.g., food, clothes, and electronics.

## Interviews

The first author carried out 21 single interviews and one focus group interview with five young men. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed, and anonymity was ensured. The interviews were conducted among employees in six different supermarkets. Most interviews were conducted during working hours at the workplace. Single interviews typically lasted approximately 20 minutes, depending on how much time the young workers were allowed to use, while focus group interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes.

The individual interview participants were selected on the basis of observations in the workplace and in cooperation with the management. The main criteria for participation in both group and individual interviews were that the workers wanted to talk about their experiences and attitudes, and that they were between 18 and 24 years. While the single interviews provided information about each participant's individual life, work, and risk management, the focus group interview provided information about shared norms and ideas about what was considered normal and accepted risk behavior at the workplace.

When possible, we strove to maximize the variation in terms of age, job function, work, and gender (Flyvbjerg 2006). All the young participants were thoroughly informed about the research project. The 26 interviewees included eight women and 18 men. The average age was 22 years; 18 of them worked full-time, five in training positions and five had managerial responsibility. The latter were employed as store managers, deputy managers, or sales managers. Eight of the interviewees worked part-time, while they were enrolled in secondary education.

The objective of the qualitative interviews was to produce knowledge about the respondents' own perspectives and attitudes toward work environment issues, safety, and precautions. The interviews were semi-structured, in the sense that they all followed the same interview guide, designed to ensure that the interviews touched upon the same themes. The respondents were encouraged to expand their narratives with examples and providing nuances and details (Søndergaard 2005a, b). They were asked about:

- Their tasks.
- The ways in which their work was organized.
- The technologies, machines, and equipment they used.
- The social settings they were a part of at the workplace in relation to colleagues and managers, and
- Actual situations at work where they were at risk of being injured.

## Observations

In addition to the interviews, the data material consists of participant observations. The observations were produced in different ways. At some workplaces, we made on-site observations for two whole days, at others we only spent a couple of hours at the site,

depending on what was possible at the workplace in question. The purpose of the observations was to gain insight into the specific work situations that young people experienced at different sites. These observations were recorded as so-called thick descriptions (Geertz 1973). Thick descriptions are not to be understood as objective descriptions of what ‘really happened,’ but rather as an expression of how the researcher experienced and interpreted the events that he/she witnessed and/or participated in. Thick descriptions should be read as subjective and situated constructions of a small sample of the life that occurred on the very day the researcher was visiting.

Through detailed descriptions of the specific work locations, selected work situations, and conversations between the staff and the researcher, the observations offer a second look at the practices we hear about in the interviews. The intention with the observations was to situate and contextualize the knowledge offered in the interviews. The observations also form the basis of the questions asked in the interviews, as it was possible to ask questions about actual everyday practices observed.

Through analyses of this material, we explore the group of ‘young adult workers’ employed in retail according to their educational background, status, work tasks, and working hours. From these analyses, typical work situations, educational backgrounds, status, and work tasks emerged and made the basis for categorizing groups of young adult workers.

### **Analyzing situated practices of safety and risk**

The construction of the five categories was an explorative, complex, and context-sensitive process. The categories took shape and were developed through collecting and analyzing the data material, with inspiration from several theoretical and analytical perspectives (Davies & Harré 1990; Gherardi 2006; Søndergaard 2005a, b). Developing the five categories began while interviewing different young employees in the supermarkets. Here we soon noticed that the group of young adult workers was highly distinct. As an example, we noticed that the employees in the supermarkets operated with a group of employees that they called ‘young workers.’ It was the employees under 18 years of age, working part-time after school. The rest of the group that we categorized as young adult workers was not only categorized as young employees, according to their age, but grouped according to educational level and status at the workplace, as well as working hours (part-time/full-time), tasks, and responsibilities.

Through observations in the field, it became clear to us that the category of age was not very accurate in defining and investigating risks and accidents in this group, as their life and work situations were far too varied. Other factors had to be incorporated and situated in the working practices to improve our understanding of their risks at work.

In a number of studies (Breslin et al. 2007a, b; Kouvonen 2001; Lucas 1997; Tannock 2001, 2003), we found arguments to follow that path. Accordingly, the first level in developing the categories was informed by the data production, taking into consideration the following two dimensions:

- Educational background and status at the workplace (following Tannock 2001, 2003).
- Tasks, responsibilities, and working hours (following Breslin et al. 2007a, b).



On the basis of these two dimensions, the development of the youth categories was derived through systematically reading through and ordering the data material according to educational, structural, and hierarchical dimensions at the workplace in relation to the young employees. This reading was done on the background of factual information of education, working time, and the like and related to workplace observations. That is why the five categories are labeled on the basis of educational, structural, and hierarchical dimensions at the workplace.

In the second step, we labeled the categories partly informed by other research done about young adult workers and partly informed by the emerging categories in our data material.

In the third step, we analyzed the data in accordance with perceptions, positionings, and practices of work and safety (following Gherardi 2006; Gherardi & Nicolini 1998), for each of the five categories of young adult workers. At this level of analysis, we focused on the following two questions:

- How do young workers perceive their work?
- How is safety practiced at the workplace?

In this last analytical step, we again searched our material in order to characterize the different groups of employees, now according to risk and safety practices and their work lives in general. With regard to the latter, the analytical work draws upon Silvia Gherardi's concepts of doing risk on safety and work environment. In her research, safety is considered a product of the situated 'activity of everyday practices' in organizations; workers in organizations are constantly learning safe work practices while participating in practice. Safety is defined as a 'body of practical knowledge': as a social product of interactions between heterogeneous human, nonhuman, technical, and social factors developed within a specific organizational context; and as part of ongoing processes of becoming an organization, of 'organizing' (Gherardi 2001, 2006; Gherardi & Nicolini 1998, 2002).

To raise our analysis, we also engage the concept of 'positioning.' Within social psychological gender studies (Davies & Harré 1990), the concept is used to examine the production of subjectivity. Gherardi uses the concept to analyze the 'politics of identity' (2006, 154). The politics of identity are understood as a choice among a plurality of selves and as positionality in a social context. Like Gherardi, we use the concept to analyze how subjects construct themselves as subjects while telling about practice, and how this is linked to practices of risk and safety in specific workplace settings. Gherardi suggests that it is within a particular discourse that a subject and the position of a subject are constructed as a compound of knowledge and power into a more or less coercive structure, which ties it to an identity (Gherardi 2006). The position of a subject then reflects both the subjective processes of position and positioning of subjects within a social structure.

The ambition at this level of the analysis was to obtain detailed knowledge of the complex ways different groups of young employees construct themselves as subjects in relation to practices of risk and safety. Accordingly, we read the material with a focus on their understandings, experiences, and orientation patterns and related this to their educational, structural, and hierarchical position in the workplace, and thus the typical risk situations they encountered in their situated practices of work.

Data on the two dimensions and two questions, altogether, provided an approach for categorizing the groups of workers according to similarities and differences between the young employees.

### Theoretical approaches to analyzing categories of young adult workers

Age understood as a biological phenomenon is based on the idea that 'being young' is an intrinsic factor, related to the person in question. In this sense, using age to define 'young' tends to make us overlook that 'young' is also a cultural and relational phenomenon; thus, this understanding of young might blur the relevant mechanisms behind young adult workers' increased risk of work accidents.

This is in line with Pierre Bourdieu, when he suggests that it is necessary "*to analyze the differences between the different youth categories*" (1993, 48), and Stuart Tannock (2001, 2003), when he argues that different groups of young workers are highly distinct. Accordingly, studies on young adult workers need to be nuanced in ways that take into consideration their differences, such as in relation to schooling and status at the workplace (Tannock 2001, 17). A more nuanced categorization of 'young adult workers' that reflects the underlying mechanisms might better help health and safety professionals to target safety problems related to this group.

In an interview, originally printed in the book *Les jeunes et la premier emploi* (1978), the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu talks about his understanding of the category 'youth.' He says:

"Age is a biological datum, socially manipulated and manipulable, and that merely talking about 'young people' as a social unit, a constituted group, with common interests, relating these interests to a biologically defined age, is in itself an obvious manipulation. At the very least one ought to analyze the differences between the different categories of 'youth', or, to be brief, at least two types of 'youth'. For example, one could systematically compare the conditions of existence (...) between the 'young' is already out of work, and the younger people at the same (biological) age who are students." (Bourdieu 1993, 95)

Bourdieu argues that the category 'youth' has to be understood as 'ideological.' In relation to this, he argues that classifications on the basis of age have to be seen as connected to power allocations of different groups of people. As an example, he argues that the construction of boundaries between 'youth' and 'old age' can be understood as a battle:

"Actually, the boundary between youth and old age is in every community something at stake as an effort in a match. For example, I read an article on the relationship between the young and elderly notables in Florence in the 16th century. Here it was shown that the older youth offered an ideology that focused on virility, at Virtue, and violence, which was a way to keep the prudence and wisdom, that is power for themselves. Likewise the historian Georges Duby clear shows how the boundaries of being young, in medieval times was subject to various manipulations, launched by those who were in possession of heirlooms. As these young people might claim their inheritance the proprietaries had to maintain them in a position as youth, i.e. as irresponsible." (Bourdieu 1997, 147)



From this perspective, drawing boundaries between categories can be seen as producing a particular cultural order. Within such an order, Bourdieu argues, some groups of people are assigned power and some not. In our case, this could be exemplified by the idea that young people, a priori, are defined as taking more risks than older workers. Parallel to this, Tannock suggests:

“Occupational hierarchies in society are constructed not just along lines of race, gender and class, but also of age. (...) The very category of youth itself—which historically has been closely associated with enrollment in formal education, exclusion from full-time or primary labor market, and, consequently, an extended period of economic semi-dependence and legal and social semi-autonomy—has expanded upwards in its normative age range. Workers in their 20s and even early 30s, for example, who might have been identified in another era as clearly being ‘adult workers’, many now see themselves (and be seen by others) as being ‘youth’ workers.” (Tannock 2003, 288–292)

From different theoretical perspectives, both Bourdieu and Tannock problematize the dominant cultural construction of ‘youth’ as a single group with common interests, and they both consider the political implications of such cultural ordering. We already know that cultural or institutional ordering frames what is acceptable to think and do (Dyrborg 2011). On this basis, we argue that another form of ordering and categorizing is necessary to get a more nuanced understanding of the group of ‘young adult workers’ and their ways of ‘doing’ risk and safety in practice.

## Results

### Situating risk and safety within five groups of young workers

In the method section, we indicated that some of the labeling of the categories of young adult workers was inspired from the extant research literature. Tannock divides the group ‘student workers’ into three subcategories according to their educational levels and labels them ‘High-school student workers,’ ‘College student workers,’ and ‘High-school graduate workers.’ This categorization is, however, not directly transferable to this study, partly because the education system in Denmark is different from the American education system, and partly because other factors than education and status are important for the way young people are positioned and position themselves in relation to risk and safety. As we demonstrate in this article, it is crucial to take in consideration whether young workers work full-time or part-time, whether they receive training in or outside the workplace, as well as other structural and hierarchical dimensions at the workplace.

Based on the analyses of the interviews and observation data, we propose categorizing young adult workers into the following five subgroups: ‘Skilled workers,’ ‘Apprentices,’ ‘Sabbatical year workers,’ ‘Student workers,’ and ‘School dropouts.’

In the following, we will analyze what characterizes their different ways of positioning themselves as (young) workers. We focus on the ways that positioning is related to different ways of ‘doing’ risk and safety in practice within the five outlined categories. The categorizations are explored and expanded according to the situated



**Table 1** Characteristics of the five groups of young adult retail workers based on 26 interviewed persons and observations at the workplace.

<b>Different groups of young adult retail workers</b>		
Based on the analysis of interviews and observation data of young employees aged 18–24 years		
Number	Category	Description
1	Skilled workers	<p>Work full-time in skilled jobs. Can have management responsibilities. Will often have a longer time perspective in the job than many other young employees. Often identify themselves with the profession/work/workplace. Often in the process of establishing their own home/family.</p> <p>Five of the 26 interviewed employees fall into this group.</p>
2	Apprentices	<p>Employed as trainees/apprentices at the workplace. Are engaged in the process of learning the trade/profession. Have, to a greater or lesser extent, chosen the work/profession as a future career path.</p> <p>Five of the 26 interviewed employees fall into this group.</p>
3	Sabbatical year workers	<p>Work full-time for a longer period of time (often one to two years) before pursuing further education.</p> <p>Four of the 26 interviewed employees fall into this group.</p>
4	Student workers	<p>Work part-time while enrolled in general or vocational upper secondary education/medium-cycle higher education/long-cycle higher education outside the workplace. Typically work irregular hours—after 15:00/3 PM and during weekends, vacations, and holidays. Adapt their working hours to their education.</p> <p>Eight of the 26 interviewed employees fall into this group.</p>
5	School dropouts	<p>Work full-time in unskilled jobs. Have not had much success in the formal education system. Mostly young men. Are often assigned physically hard work tasks. Tannock (2001) labels this group 'high-school dropout workers.' This group can potentially work in unskilled jobs for many years, if they manage to keep their jobs.</p> <p>Four of the 26 interviewed employees fall into this group.</p>

ways of 'doing' risk and safety (Gherardi 2006; Gherardi & Nicolini 1998) in the working practices. The categorization is based upon the 26 interviewed persons and observations (Table 1).

In the following, the categories are exemplified by the narratives of five different young workers, representative of the 26 interviewed persons.

**Situating risk and safety of the 'skilled worker'**

The 'skilled worker' is one who works full-time in the supermarket. The 'skilled worker' might have management responsibilities, but this is not always the case.



An example from our material is Kenneth who is 24 years old. He is a sales manager in a dry goods and wine department in a larger department store. His job is to put items on shelves and to order and receive goods. He also has the managerial responsibility for the 24 workers in his department and is responsible for the introduction of new workers, in regard to both general and safety instructions. He lives with his wife in their new house. He trained as a sales trainee and took an internal leadership program. Kenneth started working in the store when he was 18 years old as a part-time worker. He has worked in the store ever since. Kenneth does not consider himself one of the 'young workers.' He says:

"It's often the young people who have the accidents. Because young people are generally more daring than say people in their 60s who take it easy. The one who is 60 walks around quietly, enjoying his work. He doesn't give a damn about the customer. If he has to spend 10 extra minutes getting the goods down from the shelf, he just spends 10 extra minutes getting them down. But the young man who comes rushing in, he has no time to waste. I think that young people are just more risk-oriented. They just don't have any time to waste."

Kenneth positions himself as different from the other young workers. The young workers he talks about are 'risk oriented' and act quickly. When Kenneth talks about young workers, he associates them with a special kind of risk-taking behavior, which he believes is characteristic of young people. This enables Kenneth to position himself as essentially different, compared with the young workers; he is more responsible. This explanation of young peoples' accidents at work seems to be a prevalent discursive, boundary-setting practice that places risk and daring within the category of 'youth.' Drawing on the above-mentioned thinking of Bourdieu (1993), this account can be viewed as part of the ongoing construction of the 'youth' category. When actors associate young adult workers with a special kind of risk-taking behavior, it can be seen as a powerful construction, in the sense that the category of 'young workers' is ascribed negative value (Nielsen 2012, 2013).

Kenneth talks about risk from his position as manager:

"I think about it [safety, ed.], because I have people working in the store where items are placed 5-6 meters above the floor. I especially think about it, when we approach the weekend. For when you are working on an ordinary Tuesday, nothing much happens. But when we hit Friday night and Saturday afternoon, then you are clearly under pressure. Then things just go fast, and you don't always think about things. So when we get to Saturday, then I think, 'now we have to be careful that things don't go too fast.' It is often in a busy period that the accidents happen, that's when you feel the pressure."

Furthermore, Kenneth points to other factors that explain why young workers experience more accidents at work. He says that young people are pressured into working fast, and that there is a need to consider safety in the busiest work periods, where most accidents happen. By telling about practice in this way, Kenneth positions himself as one who is aware of the work routines and safety in the store, and as one who is responsible for the safety of the (young) employees.

'Skilled workers' typically position themselves in ways that demonstrate mastery of the profession or of the work. They often 'invest' in the work differently than employees

with looser ties to the workplace, and this influences the way they talk about and relate to safety and risk. Kenneth talks about his own way of dealing with risk and safety:

- Kenneth: “In terms of work, I think that none of us [full-timers, ed.] think about it [safety, ed.]. It is embedded in the routine. But if someone comes running along with a pallet, you are thinking, ‘just step aside’, or something. I think you think a lot about it when you’re in other situations than just ...”
- Interviewer: “It sounds like you think about it, because you know that there is a greater risk in those special situations? It actually requires some experience?”
- Kenneth: “Yes, absolutely.”

To Kenneth as well as many of the other employees, young as well as old, work tasks have become routine. He emphasizes this saying that because of his experience he does not think about risks on a daily basis; he has so much experience that he is only ‘aware’ in the work situations that stand out as different and potentially risky. And in these situations he takes precautions.

The quote from the interview with the skilled worker can be read as an account of a ‘social sense’ for risk at work (Baarts 2004), gained through many years of experience. Experience is an essential factor when dealing with ‘skilled workers.’ In this analysis, their sense of risk is described as an integral part of their ways of positioning themselves as experienced employees who master practices. Risk culture can thus be understood as a phenomenon that young employees relate to in different ways, depending on their position in the workplace and their relation to the profession. It would be wrong to categorize ‘the skilled worker’ as young and inexperienced. Often it is neither meaningful nor attractive to be positioned as young; it is not necessarily a category that the skilled worker positions himself within.

### **Situating risk and safety of the ‘apprentices’**

‘Apprentices’ are young adult workers aged 18–24 years, who are enrolled in a trainee program at the supermarket. Susan is an example of a young employee in this category. She has been working for one and a half years as a sales assistant, is 21 years old, and is employed in the dry goods department. She has worked in the supermarket since she was 18 years old.

- Interviewer: “Why precisely is it you [the full-timers, ed.] who lingers? In a way you must fit in perfectly here?”
- Susan: “At one time or another one begins to feel a loyalty and sense of belonging. And I also think that there is an aspect of security. I don’t know ... I can only speak for myself, but I feel at home ...”

Like Kenneth (the ‘skilled worker’), Susan feels a sense of belonging. Her plans for staying at the workplace are longer than for most of the other categories of young adult workers, and it is linked to a feeling of security with being in a profession that she has chosen and which she is learning to master. She is planning to stay at the workplace at least until she has finished her trainee program. Susan likes her job, but she is not sure



that it is possible for her to stay in retail because of her back problems; therefore, her future plans are uncertain.

Like the skilled worker, Susan does not identify herself as a young employee:

- Interviewer: "What do you think might be the reason why young people get into more accidents than older employees?"
- Susan: "There are a lot of service guys who want to run with the truck. They are just showing off."
- Interviewer: "When I say young, then you think of the service guys under 18 years?"
- Susan: "Um ... yes."
- Interviewer: "You do not think of yourself?"
- Susan: "Uh, no, of course I am also young. But here it is the service staff that is young, and we are the adults. But if you ask John [her manager, ed.], we [the apprentices and full-time workers older than 18 years, ed.] are also the young ones."
- Interviewer: "If you are not one of the young ones, what are you then?"
- Susan: "In my prime (laughs)."

Like the skilled workers, the apprentices position themselves as different from the young employees, but at the same time she is still young—in her own opinion and that of her manager. But the meaning and value that she ascribes to this category are, in the context of the workplace, not positive; the category of young adult worker is here associated with risk-taking behavior and showing off. Like Kenneth, she subscribes to the discursive practice that places risk-taking within 'youth' (Nielsen 2012, 2013) and, therefore, it is not an attractive category for her to position herself within. She does not consider herself a person who takes risks, quite the opposite. In the following, she explains the risks connected with working in the dry goods department:

- Susan: "Dry goods are a boys' department. I would say that it is the hard department. This is where you lift a lot."
- Interviewer: "How can you feel that?"
- Susan: "In the back a lot. After a Saturday I come home with a sore back. When I am lifting I know that I can injure my back. I have often thought, 'Oh no, now it's going to break'."
- Interviewer: "How often do you think about whether your tasks are safe or good for you?"
- Susan: "I know they are not good for me (...) There is a course one has to take when you are new, where you learn how to lift. You do it maybe at first, but then you forget it because it just has to go so fast. I know it's stupid and that you have to think about it. But when you receive so many items in the store ... today we received 52 pallets, you just have to work fast. (...) I am often told that I am slow. So therefore I would like to work faster. So, you just lift more and more. Those goods, they just have to get into the store. It's sometimes almost a bit as though my manager is standing behind me saying, 'Come one' [she claps her hands]. And that is just not the time to think that you have to bend your legs and not your back."

Like the skilled workers do, Susan is talking about the work situations in which she knows that she is exposed to risks. She says that her manager has told her that she is too slow, and being slow is very problematic in a context where getting the goods from the stock into the store as fast as possible is valued as a very important thing. The narrative can be read as an account about how apprentices are learning to adapt to the 'normal' practice at the workplace (Nielsen 2012, 2013). And it can be read as an example of the type of power relation that apprentices often are positioned within. In this case, the apprentice talks about adapting to what she recognizes as the 'right way' to practice risk and safety from the perspective of her manager. Apprentices are typically trying to live up to the demands of the manager, e.g., with regard to quickly getting the goods into the store, even though the apprentice knows that it implies taking risks.

### **Situating risk and safety of the 'sabbatical year workers'**

'Sabbatical year workers' are young employees over 18 years of age who work full-time while taking a sabbatical year or more before pursuing further education. Most of them have been working in the store since they were 15–16 years old, or have experience from other stores. They are hired because they already have experience and knowledge of the tasks that need to be solved.

An example is Morten, age 19. He has worked at the supermarket for more than three years. He has completed his secondary education and has worked full-time at the supermarket ever since as a sales assistant in the hardware department, selling, among other things, bicycles, electronics, DVDs, and books.

Morten knows that he is going to work for at least one year in the supermarket before he plans to continue his studies. He says that the short time frame matters with regard to how he deals with the hard physical work in the store.

In the supermarket. Morten shows the interviewer the part of the supermarket where the bikes are placed. It is outside in the courtyard behind the store in a tall shed. Inside the shed the bikes are packed into cardboard boxes in two tiers.

- Morten: "It may be a bit hard to get the boxes at the top down" (he points to the boxes that are so high up that he cannot reach them).
- Interviewer: "How do you get them down, do you use a ladder?"
- Morten: "No, usually there are some boxes I can climb onto (he points to some big cardboard boxes that stand in aisles in the shed). But mostly we take the electric pallet truck, and we climb onto it, and take them down quickly. It takes too much time to fetch a ladder; we have to work fast when customers are waiting. We have to be quick in getting the bike."
- Interviewer: "Aren't the boxes heavy?"
- Morten: "No, no. The children's bikes, they only weigh 10–12 kilos."
- Interviewer: "Has anyone ever taught you how to lift properly?"
- Morten: "Not really. But it's not something I think about. Well, I think about it when I am unpacking goods. But I'm starting to feel pain in my lower back after I started working full-time".
- Interviewer: "What do you think about this?"
- Morten: "I think that I'd better be careful. But then I also think, 'What the heck, I'm only here for the summer'."



When 'sabbatical year workers' talk about taking risks in their work (e.g., balancing on a cardboard box or a pallet truck, rather than fetching a ladder), they often, like most other young employees, argue that they do so to save time, because a customer is waiting or because it is considered too difficult to do the job in any other way. At the same time, it is significant that this group of young people do not intend to continue doing hard physical work. Their work is temporary and, therefore, most of them agree to do the physical hard work and accept the risks that many of them talk about.

Common to the 'skilled workers,' the 'apprentices,' and the 'sabbatical year workers' is that they are often considered good employees; they often do extra work at the workplace.

Morten: "It is usually the ones who are talented who are allowed to stay after turning 18. For the manager has to pay them extra, right?"<sup>1</sup>

Many of them feel responsible for making everything work and talk about being responsible for big things and little things—from having an overview of the store to knowing the price of selected goods—and that this form of responsibility motivates them in their work. For example, Morten says that he could not bear to have a job with no responsibilities.

Morten: "Just to go and put the products on the shelves without any responsibility—that is too boring. Here we are sometimes allowed to price the goods. And these shelves [he points to some shelves with DVD games], those are my own responsibility. At that point my manager is pretty good; he gives us permission to do such things, when we ask him."

Interviewer: "Is it fun to have responsibility?"

Morten: [nods]

It is generally the responsibility that separates Morten's work from the work of the 'working students' and 'school dropouts.' The work of the 'sabbatical year workers' is often given greater importance than 'simple routine' work, which requires little thinking, although routine work and hard physical work dominate all the categories.

Interviewer: "I've heard some stories (...) in which older employees say that young employees use the electric pallet truck as a skateboard."

Morten: "I do not actually ... Yes I have seen some do that."

Interviewer: "Have you seen someone do it?"

Morten: "Yes, I think so. But no, it was not inside the store, it was out in the stock room or (...) yes. It was never inside the store."

Interviewer: "Have you tried it?"

Morten: "In the store, I think I've tried it."

Interviewer: "You are actually one of those who have tried? Is it fun?"

Morten: "It's a lot of fun. But it (...) Yes, it's probably okay."

Interviewer: "Are you allowed to do it?"

Morten: "No. But it happens very seldom that (...) you do it."

Young employees using an electric pallet truck as a skateboard is a story told many times in the collected interviews. It is told as a characteristic example of how young employees are dealing with risk and safety; apparently skateboarding on a pallet truck is considered risky business, especially when it is done within a stockroom filled with goods.

Confronted with the question, Morten ends up admitting that he has actually tried the skateboarding stunt. But not inside the store, he stresses. Morten does not talk about skateboarding with any form of pride or willingness. And he does not see it as an example of a special kind of risk management among young employees like himself. From his point of view, it has nothing to do with being young, it is just a bit of fun, and it is something he rarely does.

Positioning himself as one who skateboards inside the store using an electric pallet truck is not a legitimate position to take. It is a position that is so negatively valued that he avoids it. The stories Morten chooses to tell when asked about risk and 'youth' are related to specific conditions in the supermarket, for example, time pressure. He places the risks within the conditions of the work that he does as a young employee. This does not specifically count for the 'sabbatical year workers' but could be the case for all five categories of young adult workers.

### **Situating risk and safety of the 'working students'**

'Working students' are young people between 18 and 24 years, working part-time while enrolled in an educational program (postsecondary or further on) outside the workplace. For many young workers employed in retail, going to school/college/university or other types of education is their primary activity. Therefore, it is important that their work can be adapted to their educational program and to their often busy lives with many different activities. Seen from an employer's perspective, these are relatively cheap, unskilled workers who agree to work irregular hours and who can take shifts at short notice. Many young unskilled people are ready to provide such work (Greenberger & Steinberg 1986; Kouvonen 2001; Lucas 1997; Tannock 2001, 2003).<sup>2</sup>

Oscar is an example of a 'working student.' He is 18 years old and works part-time twice a week as a shop assistant, while attending high school [gymnasium]. The big difference between Oscar and the full-time workers at the supermarket is that he primarily works from 15:00 (3 PM) and until closing time, when most of the permanent staff have gone home. And he often works on weekends and holidays—when many of the permanent staff are not at work.

Interviewer: "Do you often work until late at night?"

Oscar: "Yes, I do, until late."

Interviewer: "Is there a difference between being at work at that time compared to being at work during the day?"

Oscar: "It's harder and more boring. It has something to do with the fact that it is so uneven. I often get very tired in the evenings."

Interviewer: "Are the young employees the only ones who work in the evening?"

Oscar: "I'm actually one of the old ones in the evenings."



Oscar typically works in the busiest periods. It is a crucial difference between ‘working students’ and full-time employees that their work is largely used to fill up gaps for full-time employees (in international literature, this is called ‘stopgap jobs’ [Tannock 2001]). Their labor is primarily used outside normal working hours. Within normal working hours, the ‘working students’ generally go to school. Since the weekends and afternoons are characterized by greater customer flow and sales and fewer adult employees, the ‘working students’ more often than the other employees say that they are very busy when at work, and that they are often the most experienced employees at work. In this respect, Oscar positions himself as ‘one of the old ones,’ because he is the most experienced—compared with the many adolescent workers under the age of 18.

A Nordic study of paid work among children and youth between the ages of 13 and 17 years (Rafnsdóttir 1999) shows that this group of employees typically work alone or together with other children or young people. This is the case for 37% of the Danish respondents (Rafnsdóttir 1999, 99), and the pattern is consistent across the Nordic countries. One reason is that this group typically works with newspaper delivery and childcare in private homes (*ibid.* 8). But Oscar’s account shows that working alone or together with other young employees may also be characteristic for young employees working in retail (see also Greenberger & Steinberg 1986).

Interviewer: “How often do you think about whether what you are doing at work is safe enough, if you are to say a number between 1 and 10?”

Oscar: “Then I would say 3, especially at a time when I had back pain. I thought that it [the pain, *ed.*] could be a result of sitting still in school all day, and then I sit down again at work [behind the cash register]. Just sit and sit. And if you are not sitting in the right way ... But there have been no serious situations. The only thing I did was when I had to carry a garbage can to the container. There is like a large metal plate where I got my finger trapped. It was like ‘damn’. But it was not that serious.”

Like many working students, Oscar says that he does not think much about risks and safety at work. He says that it is only in relation to concrete situations at work, related to obvious risks, or when he actually feels pain that he thinks about it. Like the ‘apprentices,’ the ‘working students’ are often engaged in adapting to the ‘normal’ and dominating ways of practicing safety at the workplace in an attempt to keep their jobs (Nielsen 2012, 2013). They are easily replaced with another ‘working student,’ if they are not valued as someone who does a good job (Greenberger & Steinberg 1986; Nielsen 2010, 2012; Nielsen & Sørensen 2009).

The young ‘working students’ often report that their work in retail is not a job they imagine having in the future (Lucas 1997):

Interviewer: “Is this the kind of work that you want to do when you get older?”

Oscar: “No, that’s just right now, while I go to school. Now I don’t know where I am in a year, but right now it fits me well.”

Interviewer: “But not in the long term?”

Oscar: “No, you are not really challenged, you know, but right now I like it.”



For this group of employees, a part-time job in retail is very rarely a part of future job plans. It is typically a job they imagine having for a short period of time, primarily to earn money.

It is characteristic for this group that they work alone or with other young employees; in relation to this, Oscar positions himself as ‘one of the old ones,’ although his is only 18 years old. Oscar’s work tasks are almost identical with the other groups of employees in retail, but his work is characterized by routine or monotonous work. The crucial difference, compared with the ‘skilled worker’ and the ‘apprentice,’ is that he works irregular hours with higher work intensity. While his time perspective with regard to the job is limited, Oscar does not invest much of his identity in the job, compared with the ‘skilled worker’ and the ‘apprentice.’ Although he would like to do a good job, he mostly works in the supermarket to earn money, while he is getting an education.

The young employees in this group typically work irregular hours and during vacations and holidays, because they adapt their working hours to their educational program. They typically have flexible jobs, because they depend on the possibility of getting more or fewer shifts at different periods of the year, and at very short notice (Greenberger & Steinberg 1986; Kouvonen 2001; Lucas 1997; Tannock 2001, 2003).

‘Student workers’ may be extremely well-qualified and well-educated, and they may have worked in the workplace in question for many years. But their outlook on the future in relation to the workplace is often short, in the sense that they only keep the job while studying or until they manage to find a more skilled job during or after completing their studies.

### Situating risk and safety of the ‘school dropouts’

‘School dropouts’ are a group of young employees who for various reasons do not plan on pursuing a secondary education or who have so far had little success in the education system. Most of them have worked in retail or other unskilled jobs (e.g., fast food) since they were 15–16 years of age.

An example of a ‘school dropout’ is John. He is 18 years old and works full-time as a service assistant. He says that he dropped out of a basic vocational education and training program because, as he says, “*there was too much trouble.*” He says that he has a bad shoulder, which means that his shoulder sometimes becomes dislocated, and that he often has a sore back. He has only worked in the supermarket for a few months. This is what John says about his tasks in the supermarket:

John: “I’m an ‘all-round man,’ if you can call it that. Or I do what the others do not bother to do. So if they spill something they call me. And then I have the bottle sorting room, and all those beer crates. Um, and then I have all of the dog food. It’s quite heavy.”

Interviewer: “Had it been better if someone had shown you how to lift those boxes when you started?”

John: “No, why should they? I have had similar work tasks since I was 15. I can’t learn anything new anymore. I can’t learn to lift in a particular way. I’m used to lifting in my own way.”

Interviewer: “And since you were 15 you have done what?”



- John: "Been lifting heavy bars, working with horses, lifted bales of straw. I tell you. There is nothing I haven't been lifting."
- Interviewer: "But wouldn't you like to do it differently, for your body's sake?"
- John: "Yes, but once you've got a habit it's totally hard to change. It's like cigarettes, you can't just stop like this [snap], it is only those people who are totally psycho who can do that."

John is an example of the young men who are primarily recruited for jobs in retail, because they have a strong physique. Several managers in the retail industry reveal in the interviews that they recruit young men in good physical shape specifically to do the physically hard work. Youth and strength are pointed out as important parameters for this group of young employees. And the tasks they typically handle are the tasks that require great strength. There are many tasks of this kind in retail, where the circulation of goods in and out of the store is constant. John does not get the type of work that Morten gets: work that is seen as meaningful and exciting. He does not order goods and is not responsible for placing items in the store.

Some of the young employees in this group, especially young men, talk about physical strength as a particular youth-related phenomenon. Some talk about the hard work as a form of training, a training that they would have done anyway in their spare time, if they were not working. But for most of them, the physically hard work is not assigned positive value; it is described as inevitable and arduous.

- Interviewer: "Did you also get this job because you are strong and able to lift this heavy stuff?"
- John: "Yes, I think so."
- Interviewer: "Is it hard to get the job you have?"
- John: "Yes, right now it's hard to get a job anywhere, I think." (time of a global financial crisis, ed.)
- Interviewer: "Does that have any impact on why you are here?"
- John: "Yes it has. I can't really quit, because I know where I would end up and that is at the Job Centre. I am not going to bloody well sit down there every day. So I have to occupy myself with something, plus the wages are a bit better than receiving social benefits."

Physical strength is regarded as the primary reason why John is working in retail. When asked, he says that he accepted the job because he can see no other alternatives, except unemployment benefits. John is positioning himself within a dominating sense of resignation. He does not think that it is possible for him to change his situation, neither at this workplace nor in the future. This kind of positioning is seldom associated with the category of 'youth.' On the contrary, 'youth' is often associated with significance and characterized by lots of opportunities and openness. John's way of positioning himself as a risk-taking employee can be viewed as a product of resignation, which might be related to his lack of success within the education system and to the kinds of tasks he is doing, because of his position at the bottom of the hierarchy.

This group of young employees is a particularly vulnerable group, because they are assigned particularly arduous tasks more often than other working adolescents. Several

expressed that they perceive the work as stressful, but at the same time they appear to accept this as a necessary condition if they want a job. This group of employees often works in retail for longer periods than other groups of young employees, because they have limited opportunities for getting other jobs within or outside the retail sector (Table 2).

**Table 2** Characteristics of the five young adult categories concerning a number of dimensions related to risks at work.

	1) Skilled worker	2) Apprentice	3) Sabbatical year worker	4) Student worker	5) School dropout
Work time	Full-time	Full-time, but alternating school/work	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time
Time perspective in work	Long term	Long term	Short term	Short term	Long term
Working hours	Primarily normal working hours (daytime)	Primarily normal working hours (mostly daytime)	Spread throughout the entire day and all days	Primarily outside normal working hours and on weekends and holidays	Primarily normal working hours (daytime)
Type of work	Individual responsibility/management, less routine work, less hard physical work	Educational perspective. Varied, incl. individual responsibility, hard physical work, and routine work	Varied, depending on experience. Incl. hard physical work and routine work	Hard physical work and routine work, often working alone or with other young employees	High degree of hard physical work and routine work
Perceive themselves as young?	Rarely	Varied, but seldom	Almost always	Almost always	Varied, but seldom
Perception of risk at work	A sense for risk and safety is seen as an integral part of posing oneself as responsible and as master of the job	Place the risks within the conditions of the work	Place the risks within the conditions of the work	Place the risks within the conditions of the work	Risk seen as a condition for having a job
Risk-taking perception	Does not consider oneself a risk-taker	Does not consider oneself a risk-taker	Takes risks to save time or to do a 'good' job	Takes risks to save time or to do a 'good' job	Risk-taking seen as a product of resignation
Position themselves	Central within practice Responsibility for others—also in relation to risk and safety	Varied, depending on experience and responsibility	Varied, depending on experience and responsibility	Peripheral or at the bottom of the hierarchy	At the bottom of the hierarchy



## Discussion

It is our intention that the proposed categories can be used as a tool for spotting the differences between different groups of young adult workers. We do not wish to say that the proposed boundaries and differences are the only ones that exist. Neither do we think of the categories as stable or fixed. They are to be seen as dynamic and moving categories describing different risk positions. The everyday of employees in this age group will typically consist of many transitions: from education to job, from education to another education, transitions from different types of jobs and between different types of positions at the same workplace. Altogether this means that a young employee can move from one young adult worker category to another very quickly, if he or she, for example, drops out of an education and gets a full-time job. The boundaries between the categories are fluent and not always easy to delimit accurately.

In practice, it will in many cases be difficult to fit a young adult worker into one category. We would therefore like to stress that the objective of the categorization is not to put young workers in different categories. The intention is conversely to open the category 'young adult workers' and point to the variation.

The delimitation of the age group 18–24 as 'young adults' is of course arbitrary, and it must be questioned if age is a good delimiter for 'youth.' Furthermore, following Bourdieu (1993), we would like to draw attention to the fact that 'youth' as a category in itself invites to certain types of stereotypical understandings of how we can approach the working environment of this group, understandings that might be a hindrance to more efficient ways of improving their working conditions, including preventing accidents at work. We have presented these categories to a group of about 50 representatives of the government and the social partners, dealing with the health and safety of young workers, in order to test the face validity of the categories. We received positive evaluation that the categories were meaningful in terms of communication and directing initiatives when preventing accidents in the group of young workers.

One very important finding is that the use of the category 'young' is to be nuanced. We have demonstrated that the understanding of 'youth' as an age-related biological category might be a hindrance for targeting the risks of young adult workers, as it tends to overemphasize individual factors like advice, information, training, and supervision and, to a lesser degree, focus on the structural and cultural environments wherein these young workers are embedded.

The 'skilled worker' and the 'apprentice' do not identify themselves within the category 'young.' They position themselves as very different from young workers. When they talk about young employees, they associate them with a special kind of risk-taking behavior, which is the opposite of the way they position themselves. For both the 'skilled worker' and the 'apprentice,' talking about and relating to safety is an integral part of positioning oneself as responsible and as a 'master' of one's job. As we have argued, it would be wrong to relate to the 'skilled worker' and the 'apprentice' as 'young employees,' since the 'skilled worker' primarily positions himself as a manager with responsibility for other employees. And what counts for the apprentice with regard to risk and safety is primarily to adapt to what she recognizes as the valued and 'right way' of practicing safety and risk in the supermarket. She is trying to live up to the demands of her manager, even though she knows that it implies taking risks.

The third category of young employees we have defined as ‘sabbatical year workers.’ In general, it is the task responsibility that separates the work of the ‘sabbatical year worker’ from the work of the ‘working student’ and the ‘school dropout.’ The work of the ‘sabbatical year worker’ is often given greater importance than ‘simple routine’ work, although routine work and hard physical work dominate all five categories.

When ‘sabbatical year workers’ talk about taking risks in their work, they often, like most other young employees, argue that if they take risks it is to save time, because a customer is waiting, or because it is considered too difficult to act in another way. At the same time, it is significant that they do not intend to continue the hard physical work. Their work is temporary and, therefore, most of them agree to do the hard physical work and to take the risks that many of them talk about. Like the ‘working student,’ the ‘sabbatical year worker’ places the risks in the group of conditions of the work he is doing as a young employee, and not within the category of ‘youth.’ The category of ‘youth’ is not associated with value, and is therefore not an attractive position to take when talking about risk and safety in the context of the retail industry.

According to the fourth category outlined in the article, the ‘working student,’ we argue that it is characteristic for the young employees within this category and for their ways of practicing risk and safety to work alone or with other young employees. In this respect, the ‘working student’ quoted in this paper positions himself as ‘one of the old ones,’ although they may be as young as 18 years. The tasks he does are almost identical with the tasks of the other groups of employees in retail, but his work is more dominated by routine or monotonous work. The crucial difference, when compared with the ‘skilled worker’ and the ‘apprentice,’ is that ‘working student’ is working irregular working hours with higher work intensity. While their time perspective with regard to the job is limited, the ‘working students’ do not invest much of their identity in their jobs, compared with the ‘skilled worker’ and the ‘apprentice.’ They mainly work to make some money while getting an education.

Youth and strength are presented as important parameters for the ‘school dropouts,’ because the tasks handled by this group of workers require great strength. The ‘school dropouts’ do not get the type of work that the ‘skilled workers,’ the ‘apprentices,’ and the ‘sabbatical year workers’ do: tasks that are considered meaningful and exciting. The ‘school dropouts’ do not order goods and they do not take decisions on where to place items in the store. When asked, the ‘school dropout’ represented here says that he accepted the job in the supermarket, because he can see no other alternatives. He positions himself with a sense of resignation. He does not think that it is possible for him to change his situation, neither at his present workplace nor in the future.

The way that the ‘school dropouts’ position themselves as a risk-taking group of workers is to be viewed as a product of resignation, which is related to the lack of success within the educational system, and to the kinds of tasks that they do because of their position at the bottom of the hierarchy. This group of workers often works in retail for longer periods than other groups of young employees, because they have limited opportunities to get other jobs both in and outside the retail or fast-food sector.

As described in the beginning of the article, recent studies on young adult workers conclude that the increased risk of accidents among young workers is closely linked to the type of work they are assigned and the type of working conditions they work under (Breslin et al. 2007a, b). These studies show that the increased risk of injuries is linked to the fact that young adult workers tend to be employed in more physically demanding



jobs; in more hazardous jobs; and that they are more likely to be new in a job. These are all factors that increase the risk of accidents.

Breslin et al. (2007a, b) also concludes that being a newcomer in a job forms a special risk. This article shows there is a notable difference in relation to experience and period of employment within the group of young adult workers. While the period of employment for the 'School dropout,' the 'Sabbatical year' worker, and the 'Student worker' varies, yet often can be very short, the skilled worker and the apprentices are often more experienced and have a longer time perspective in their jobs.

Rasmussen (2011) found that heavy work, high psychological demands, and low social support increase the risk of experiencing work accidents among young employees. In this study, we cannot conclude anything about psychological demands. However, the degree of social support clearly varies according to what time of day the young employees are working. Particularly the 'Student workers' are traditionally working outside normal working hours and on weekends and holidays, and in this study they often tell of heavy work. On the other hand, the 'Skilled worker' and the 'Apprentice' often have more ordinary working hours, more social support, and sometimes less heavy work.

The findings in our study are well in accordance with these studies.

## Conclusion

This study did not set out to conclude on exactly how risk is distributed among the different groups of young adult workers. Yet, on the basis of the exploration of the five categories of young adult workers, we conclude that the exposure to risks and accidents is not equally distributed among the group of young workers. Some young adult workers aged 18–24 will be more exposed to risks and accidents at work than other young workers, while some groups of workers aged 18–24 are not more exposed than workers over 24 years of age.

What we conclude is that the risks seem to be distributed among the groups, and that some young adult workers seem to be more exposed than others. As we have shown in this article, most of the young employees in this study tell about hard physical work and risky work situations, but its degree varies among the categories. While the 'Skilled worker' and the 'Apprentice' tell of work that often includes individual responsibility and management for the skilled worker, the other categories of young adult workers tell of different degrees of hard physical work and routine work. Especially the 'School dropout' tells of a high degree of hard physical work and routine work.

Another important finding is that, apart from student workers, the workers aged 18–24 usually do not consider themselves as 'young.' In public communication and approaches to the prevention of work environment problems, workers aged 18–24 are often treated as one single group, with the same conditions on the labor market and with common interests and perceptions of being young. This is a challenge, both when we want to understand the underlying mechanisms leading to increased risk for workers in this age group and also if we target this group as just 'youth.'

Our point is that age cannot stand alone, when we try to answer why the group of workers aged 18–24 years is more exposed to accidents than older workers. As age is an easy and readily available category for defining 'youth,' we risk overemphasizing the importance of biological age. And we risk overemphasizing individual characteristics

such as awareness and cognitive limitations before structural, relational, and hierarchical dimensions at the workplace. The understanding of 'youth' as an age-related biological category might explain why approaches to prevent accidents among young adult workers have a tendency to include individual factors like advice, information, and supervision before the structural and cultural environment wherein they are embedded. Our point is not to argue that experience, training, and cognitive limitations are not important for understanding risks at work, but understanding 'youth' as a matter of biological age alone might be too easy a step in explaining the background for young adult workers' increased risk of accidents at work.

With the above analyses, we have demonstrated that workers aged 18–24 are a rather heterogeneous group that can hardly be addressed just as 'youth.' We also wanted to demonstrate that other important dimensions have to be incorporated and situated in the work practice surrounding this group of employees, if useful approaches to preventing accidents at work are going to be successful. We have thus expanded the category of 'young adult workers' into five categories and characterized their specific risks at work along a number of dimensions, which provides a good starting point for the health and safety practitioner.

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## End notes

- <sup>1</sup> In Denmark, young people under 18 years, working as unskilled shop assistants in retail, earn approximately 10.70 USD per hour, if they are paid according to the HK Trade Agreement (from March 1, 2011). For unskilled shop assistants over 18 years of age, the wage is 17.27 USD per hour. Therefore, many contracts end the day the employee turns 18.
- <sup>2</sup> According to Danish law, young employees over 15 years of age enrolled in compulsory education are allowed to work for a maximum of two hours on school days, and eight hours on other days. In weeks with school days they are allowed to work a maximum of 12 hours per week.