

AGATA KRASOWSKA
University of Wrocław

Biographical boundaries of work

Introduction

A look at biography from the point of view of the boundaries of work as an effect of neoliberal globalisation shows us the elusive values that we are dealing with in the social world. The purpose of my article is to look for such biographical boundaries expressed in the phenomenon of flexible employment. In the body of the paper, I analyse the biographical interviews with young workers in Wrocław which contain their views on finding themselves in a situation of precarious employment. Here, gainful employment sets the everyday rhythm of coping strategies in relation to managing an individual's time, place of residence, finances and one's personal life. It also refers to the number of performed professions; the record was nine professions performed by a thirty-year-old informant. The concept of biographical boundaries raises the question of how flexible employment influences the formation of individual and collective identity and whether biographies treat the development of their own self-awareness as a part of the development of social class. I am also interested in how individuals problematise their own life stories in the conditions of systemic uncertainty? What mechanism is used to generate the boundaries of precarious work, or in other words, to what extent can agency in setting biographical boundaries of work arise when gainful employment is one of the main activities of modern man?

Biographical boundaries in empirical research

Biographical boundaries are the space which contains the possibility to move in reality, use different meanings and combine them in new, different forms. Within the limits defined by biography there are many ways to define facts and processes, since biographical boundaries are the space where one can find the agency

(Archer 2013, 22–27) and reflexivity (Archer 2007, 4) of informants, both structurally and individually conditioned. Hence, my paper will focus on the analysis of biographical interviews conducted with young (up to 30 years old) employees of the service sector, living in Wrocław (Poland) and working pursuant to civil law contracts. The interviews were conducted in cooperation with Adam Mrozowski (cf. Mrozowski et al. 2013, 2015). The research was carried out in the spring of 2013 with students from the Institute of Sociology, University of Wrocław. We have focused on the analysis of the influence of precarious labour on individual and collective identity, as well as individual and collective agency of precarious workers, which was expressed in the ways the informants dealt with their lives. In order to understand the processes of identity and life strategy formation, we have conducted biographical interviews. In the first part, we asked our informants to tell us their life stories, in the second, we asked questions about life experiences outside work. We managed to collect twenty-four interviews with employees of different professional experience in the service sector. The research involves employees performing both high-skilled work (tutoring, web development, translation, journalism, PR), as well as simple tasks (cleaning, babysitting, call centre jobs).

The analysis of interviews gives us the opportunity to discover the patterns of behaviour and experience conditioned by the social processes and phenomena specific for a given social milieu that sets the limits of individual searches. Therefore, the analysis of the structural conditions determining the possibility to pursue the so-called professional career will be intertwined with the reality of individual biographical experience. These are the boundaries that define the possibility of informants' agency. Finally, the boundary is a term which in the biographies of informants defines the elements related to certain values. These values include participation and creativity which point directly to the phenomenon of alienation through work.

Precarious work, its boundaries and alienation: Theoretical framework

Work means on the one hand empowerment, manifestation, realisation of human “power” and on the other hand, it is always conducted in a social context, cooperation, competition or sovereignty. In work one can find all the features of human action. Work exerts an important influence on workers, increasing their capacity and “powers” for future work. Work is an auto-creative behaviour (Sztompka 2007, 165). It contributes to the development of both the subject and object affected by the subject. It is primarily through their work that men begin to control and understand each other, achieve self-image (Plamenatz 1975, 118). Therefore work is one of the most important human activities and it is the sphere which forms the “essence of the species”. However, in a class society employees become strangers to their own actions and strangers to their creations. They do not perceive their actions as their

own deeds any more, since the products of their work do not belong to them (Israel 1971, 43). These circumstances spread to all aspects of human life. So to what extent do the individuals feel alienated? Marx, when describing the class society, shows a dehumanised human being. Alienation means depriving people of creativity and participation. Humans cease to be creative, they do not participate in cooperative associations, become alienated towards other people.

Karl Marx distinguished four forms of alienated labour. The first is connected with alienation of the product from the labourer, i.e. the work is an object which is external and hostile to human. The labourer becomes a slave and the products of work do not belong to the labourer. The second form describes alienation of the worker from the process of work. This is tantamount to denying oneself, because the product does not belong to the worker. At work a person feels homeless and incapable of satisfying themselves, because they work for others' needs. The relation between work and the worker is alienating. Therefore we can find suffering against activity, powerlessness against strength, weakness against creation. The third form is when alienated labour alienates itself from species-being. It is assumed that human beings are universal and free beings. Alienated labour takes away their species' life. Marx states that alienating labour causes alien being, because it alienates man from his/her own body and human life. The fourth form is when the alienated labour alienates the self from other human beings (Fromm 1991).

Therefore, no matter what kind of form the work takes, it is a manifestation of two characteristic relations of the human condition: creativity and participation. I consider these two categories as the boundaries of certain values regarding human activity. They manifest themselves in different spheres of life of individuals. The biographical boundaries of work contain the processes enhancing or limiting the individual's agency.

In the next part of the article, the following themes that emerged in the course of the analysis of interviews will be examined in detail:

- the impact of flexibility on biographical boundaries of work;
- biographical boundaries of influence on the social status — reluctance of employees to participate in employee representations;
- consequences of the precarious nature of work: creativity as a biographical boundary.

The impact of flexibility on biographical boundaries of work

Flexibility is seen by many informants as the main requirement of contemporary labour markets. Firstly, in the narrations one can see the ambivalence in defining the experiences connected with work with the flexible form of employment. On the one hand, flexible employment is seen as a chance to fulfil their professional aspirations, test their skills as a freelancer. In one informant's opinion, a flexible

way of hiring gives more opportunities in the labour market, because it allows them to combine studying and working. The flexible way of work sometimes is considered a synonym of independence:

I am not at all an advocate of having a stable job. That means the full-time. Because... it is such a little illusion. (Arkadiusz, groundskeeper)

On the other hand, instability is a phenomenon defined pejoratively, associated with risk and uncertainty of tomorrow, imposed by systemic circumstances. Beside the lack of social security and financial liquidity, the lack of stable income causes some informants to balance financially on the verge of survival:

I haven't got a stable job, I do not have a stable income, so I have to somehow plan / y I mean divide the money, I mean so I have enough to survive, for a whole month. (Inga, babysitter)

For someone to have precarious employment could be the first level of career, but for many this is a dead end, depriving them of any self-fulfilment opportunities and full access to such goods as health care, banking services, care services (kindergarten, nursery), the ability to rent an apartment. At the same time, in almost all the collected interviews we can see the processes of "normalisation", adapting to this state of affairs:

Two words: educated, unemployed. It seems to me that that ... well just not having a permanent job, somewhere you live there all the time, somewhere in that ... the uncertainty but this too one can get used to. (Ada, English tutor)

Secondly, the flexibility determines the biographical boundaries of work. It means the willingness to subordinate one's life to gainful employment; this generates specific strategies of social life:

Interviewer: How do you deal with the impact of the, uh, the unstable situation in your personal life?

Interviewee: As I say, I do not see it as something wrong, but rather take it that this form of work is flexible and this flexibility at this stage where I am is just right. (Agnieszka, PR manager)

Writing about the biographical boundaries of work, we have also analysed the problem of selected social and biographical consequences of precariousness of work (cf. Mrozowicki et al. 2015). The analysis of interviews with young workers in the services sector in Wrocław indicates the existence of two aspects of this phenomenon. On the one hand, we have the boundary as work-oriented freelancing, do-it-yourself biography type, on the other hand, we have to deal with forced precarisation. Between these two extremes there is a space filled by structural necessity and individual choice, lack of stable employment, or the risk of the lack of work. It can be argued that in this, biographical and existential sense, precarisation of work becomes a common experience, and this is one of the key challenges for the social sciences and political practice in the twenty-first century.

Do-it-yourself biography is connected with the belief in the legitimacy of precarious work. Some informants claimed that precarious work is a modern source of gainful employment and it gives them an opportunity to proof their abilities, to find themselves in the contemporary labour market. Do-it-yourself biography means independence from the organisations of job placement and permanent attachment to one company. In other words, precarious work based on flexibility is positively valued as freedom of choice and resourcefulness. Informants expressed a specific pride in this precarious lifestyle:

I'm the type of the independent and such. I do not believe in all these (with contempt) career offices, employment agencies. According to me such institutions and places are completely for helpless people. (Agnieszka, PR manager)

In opposition to the "do-it-yourself" biography, there is a category of forced precarisation. Forced precarisation is an inertial effect of the labour market which influences workers' careers. Informants have different expectations of an aim of their employment, namely they would like a permanent job which essentially remains a dream. The most common issue in the interviews is the fact that the amount of earnings is not enough for everyday life. Therefore we can interpret the situation of informants in terms of being the working poor who hardly get by. They do not see the future as safe and they are often resigned:

When it comes to friends, absolutely all of them, /y all the people with whom I stay in contact with are exactly in the same situation. One do better, the other worse, but no matter what they do, however, it is the unfortunate freelance. ... And ... some succeed so well that they do not need any support, but, in turn, often live in conditions so bad that they just pay for a flat at a very low, financial level, well, because they live in, 4–6 people, and they have those few square meters where available have only a computer and a crib, /y and in this arrangement they can afford on something. So, in other words, life, life, but what a life. (Andrzej, announcer, actor, barman)

Between forced precarisation and do-it-yourself biography there exists a third category, a rebellious biography. This type is represented by informants who are critical of the existing precarious system of employment. Simultaneously, informants try to use this system to their own advantage and in their own manner. Firstly, they do not reject civil law contracts, but are reluctant to work for low wages. Secondly, informants resist the corporate lifestyle and want to create their own biography. Precarious work is for them an unwanted necessity, but they try to live according to their own value system and a sense of dignity. This does not mean the rebellion against a permanent job, but the rejection of the subordination of life to gainful employment and career:

If you want to find a job as a manager in an office, that I am guilty of myself, that hell, I had such a beautiful life, ... unfortunately, I do not have a full university education. / Y ... you understand. No ... I do not feel that such a free style, as if I have now in my life all the time, ... in some way limited me. (Andrzej, announcer, actor, barman)

Flexibility in general can prevent participation. Striving for flexible labour relations was the main and direct cause of the increase in the world precariat. There is a growing rush towards the flexibility of labour, as well as a process of re-commodification, which makes the work measurable through wages (Standing 2011, 85). This creates a temporary and seasonal labour market in which it is easy to dismiss and hire employees. Flexibility leads to creativity in finding and changing work, but it does not give a sense of security. Do-it-yourself biography refers to justifying one's position as a consequence of given labour market transitions; it is connected with the feeling of being creative. Participation is possible only as a matching element of the labour market, because the changes in the labour market are positively evaluated.

Biographical boundaries of influence on the social status — reluctance of employees to participate in employee representations

The informants mostly implement individualistic strategies of dealing with their own work situation, such as readiness for labour migration within the country and abroad, retraining, accepting every opportunity to work, self-employment, or, less frequently, setting up social cooperatives. These strategies absorb a lot of energy and time, causing primarily the focus on an individual career path. As a result, the trade union campaigns against the expansion of civil law contracts were perceived by the informants with great suspicion, if they were aware of them at all. Informants rarely believed in help to improve working conditions from someone other than themselves. If they have been expecting help, their expectations were directed towards the state, which was also bestowed with distrust. Only social activists, involved in the activities of other local social movements, expressed some support for the trade unions. As a result, we can identify three specific approaches towards collective action: liberal criticism, conditional/pragmatic support and the lack of knowledge/fatalism¹.

Liberal criticism, typical for informants with relatively strong educational resources and bargaining power in the labour market, with limited contacts with social movements — included principled rejection of unions as politicised organisations, identified with the Polish People's Republic, harmful for workers, because their actions deepened unemployment. For instance, Mirosław, a translator employed on the civil law contracts, argues that “young people can be helped through abolishing personal income taxes, corporate income taxes and other taxes for running business”. More generally, informants take on the employers' perspective and adopt a market-liberal discourse about trade unions, which is tinged with

¹ This part of the paper is a shortened version of the arguments presented in Mrozowicki et al. (2015) and developed together with other co-authors.

criticism. Critical arguments refer to the trade unions' involvement in high level politics and identification of trade unions with state socialism. We can find, however, the belief in institutional support for entrepreneurs as a means to improve young people's situation. Some informants define trade union actions with regard to civil law contracts as anti-employee actions.

The second type of attitude towards trade unionism was labelled as the "reformist" and "pragmatic" approach to trade unions. The reformist critique of employee organisations is typical of informants slightly less well-off in the labour market or having contacts with social movements at the local level. This kind of orientation implied rejection of hierarchical and bureaucratic trade unions organisations, while expressing the need for some representation of the interests of workers, an example being Maria (self-employed in the catering services) who says: "I think that people in Poland scream too little". Reformism also involved criticism of a hierarchical, "party-like" trade union culture and lack of real generational change within the unions. The latter were defined as organisations that represent mostly the privileged, core employees, such as miners, steelworkers and employees in the public sector, still "stuck in the myth of *Solidarność*" (Ada, English tutor), with the leadership consisting of "the bunch of old farts" (Kamila, self-employment, catering). However, some of the reformers also voiced their partial readiness to join the unions at a certain moment/stage of their career. In this respect, their pragmatic motivation resembled the one of young union activists (Kubisa and Ostrowski 2014). Others, who had experiences with the activities of new social movements in Wrocław (such as various community and urban organisations), expressed their conviction that in the current labour market and political situation, young people's protests were necessary, but the trade union formula might be too narrow for them.

The third type expressed disbelief in any sense of collective action. It reflected the lack of knowledge about trade union activities combined with a limited interest and belief in any kind of collective action to change the situation of young workers. We could not identify any clear relationship between this type of discourse and occupational experiences of our informants. It emerged mostly from the narratives of students performing low-skilled, "junk jobs", who considered their work situation temporary and were generally not interested in the phenomena and processes taking place in the public sphere.

Consequences of the precarious nature of work: Creativity as a biographical boundary

Precarious work could be a matter of choice, but it exerts a significant influence on one's biography. Regardless of whether flexible work is the informant's choice or necessity, all the informants in this study share the existential sense of uncertainty

mentioned by Sowa (2010). They pointed out that as a result of precarious employment, their social and family lives suffered since they were devoted to paid work and searching for it. Despite the fact that life experiences run across divisions and statuses, they do not lead to the formation of a new sense of common fate over structural divisions. The informants also lacked adequate language to describe their social position. Even in the situation in which the researchers presented the definition of precariat (unknown to most of the interviewees), their reactions were mostly negative or marked by misunderstanding. Precariat was associated with proletariat, lower social status and junk contracts, social degradation, temporality and transience. Let us take Andrzej's statement as an example:

I don't feel as part of precariat, because flexible forms of employment do not reduce the quality of my life. I live myself on just the level that I want to generate myself. If I wanted to generate another level of my life, then I would do it. (Andrzej, announcer, actor, barman)

Another example is Agnieszka's statement:

It seems to me that this is just another term coined by sociologists, who somehow try to describe our reality, which in my opinion is too complicated to cram it into some framework in which people with fee-for-task contracts are dissatisfied, but all people on full contracts are happy. (Agnieszka, PR manager)

Creativity as a biographical boundary in relation to work is a sphere of meanings developed by informants in a neoliberal society. Creativity gives an opportunity to participate in the social reality not as an alienated person. Being creative means to have influence on one's life, to participate in it, not being strange to the world in which we live. From the research we can see that even if someone's situation is determined by precarious work, they try to be creative, i.e. to think that they can influence the situation. This might be an additional reason to reject the term "precariat" which is identified with a lack of influence.

Creativity as a feature of human beings is in the centre of Marx's theory and the concept of alienation helps us understand the concept of human being. Human beings live in a specific society and social class, but they can also liberate themselves. That is why humans are creative. Creativity is useful in overcoming determinisms. Human beings are creators of history and they develop and transform. But in the research we can observe that this creativity is defined in individual, neoliberal, rather than collective terms. The informants rather adapt to precarious conditions as something appropriate.

This kind of creativity reflects a discourse of neoliberal creativity which is connected with the discussion about the expected direction of social changes. It means the idea of "new individualism" based on the assumption that the source of casual powers lies in individuals and the stimulators of agency are human needs. But these needs are connected with the requirements of market forces (Krzysztofek and Szczepański 2005, 40). The informants might think that precarity is creative and modern. However, it is still marked by the structural process of alienation.

Conclusions: Biographical boundaries of work as an alienating phenomenon

Following the analysis of the interviews with precarious workers, we can return to some of our basic research questions about the biographical boundaries of their work and the sources of collective disorganisation. It can be argued that one of these sources are processes related to alienation. Precarious work is an alienating process, because labour is the main imperative of life which determines and takes control over the workers' private lives. Precarious workers are like a commodity, a means of production. Devaluation of their work becomes the source of their alienation.

However, we can also detect the spaces and the subjective need for creativity in the interviews collected. As Karl Marx wrote, the formation of human beings' ideas is interwoven with material activity and the material relationship with others. Therefore the activities generate the means of production and social relationship: "In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production" (Marx 1977). In the situation when there is a contradiction between productive forces and the existing production relationship, social revolutions can occur.

Yet, the evidence of a forthcoming revolution is absent in the data collected. In the research presented, we cannot observe a class in the making, either at the level of subjective identifications or at the level of collective practices. Instead, the data collected document a neoliberal creativity which lies at the heart of a neoliberal discourse. This kind of creativity is fundamentally different from the Marxian concept and it means adaptation to and acceptance of the labour market.

References

- Archer, M. 2007. *Making Our Way through the World. Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M. 2013. "Jak porządek społeczny wpływa na ludzkie sprawstwo? Refleksyjność jako mechanizm pośredniczący między strukturą i sprawstwem." In *Sprawstwo. Teorie, metody, badania empiryczne w naukach społecznych*, ed. A. Mrozowicki, O. Nowaczyk, and I. Szlachciowa. Kraków: NOMOS, 19–35.
- Fromm, E. 1991. *Marx's Concept of Man*. New York: Frederic Ungar Publishing.
- Israel, J. 1971. *Alienation*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Krzysztofek, K., and M.S. Szczepański. 2005. *Zrozumieć rozwój. Od społeczeństw tradycyjnych do informacyjnych*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo UŚ.
- Kubisa, J., and P. Ostrowski. 2014. "Młodzi w związkach zawodowych. Rewitalizacja czy reprodukcja?" In *Organizowanie związków zawodowych w Europie. Badania i praktyka*, ed. J. Czarzasty, and A. Mrozowicki. Warszawa: Scholar, 71–92.

- Marx, K. (1977). *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>. Accessed August 3, 2015.
- Mrozowski, A., A. Krasowska, and M. Karolak. 2013. "Od etatu do prekariatu: współczesne przemiany w sferze pracy w Polsce/From Permanent Employment to Precariat: Contemporary Transformations in the Sphere of Work in Poland". In: *Nadmiar i brak/Excess and Lack*, ed. Ł. Huculak, B. Skowron, K. Dabrowska, J. Jernajczyk, M. Zakrzewska, and R. Zarzycki. Wrocław: Akademia Młodych Uczonych i Artystów, 35–43.
- Mrozowski, A., A. Krasowska, and M. Karolak. 2015. "Stop the Junk Contracts! Young Workers and Trade Union Mobilization against Precarious Employment in Poland." In *Young Workers and Trade Unions: A Global View*, ed. A. Hodder, and L. Kretsos. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 123–141.
- Plamenatz, J. 1975. *Karl Marx's Philosophy of Man*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Sowa, J. 2010. "Prekariat — globalny proletariat w epoce pracy niematerialnej." In *Robotnicy opuszczają miejsca pracy*, ed. J. Sokołowska. Available at: https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/1781042/sowa_prekariat.pdf. Accessed August 26, 2015.
- Standing, G. 2011. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney: Bloomsbury.
- Sztompka, P. 2007. *Socjologia zmian społecznych*. Kraków: Znak.

Biographical boundaries of work

Abstract

The paper contains an analysis of biographical interviews with the young precarious workers in Wrocław. The concept of the biographical boundaries of work is considered in the context of alienation, precarity, creativity and flexible employment. The biographical interviews collected include the views of the respondents on the situation of finding themselves in precarious work. The paper answers the questions of how individuals problematise the story of their own everyday life under the conditions of systemic uncertainty? By means of what mechanism are the boundaries of precarious work produced, or to what extent can the agency of informants be developed?

Biograficzne granice pracy

Abstrakt

Tekst zawiera analizę wywiadów biograficznych z młodymi wrocławskimi prekariuszami. Koncepcja biograficznych granic pracy jest rozpatrywana w kontekście alienacji prekariatu, kreatywności oraz elastycznego zatrudnienia. Zebrane wywiady biograficzne zawierają poglądy osób badanych na sytuację odnajdowania się w sytuacji pracy prekarnej. Tekst odpowiada na pytania, w jaki sposób dana jednostka problematyzuje historię swojego własnego życia na co dzień w warunkach niepewności systemowej? Za pomocą jakiego mechanizmu wytwarzane są granice pracy prekarnej, czyli do jakiego stopnia może zaistnieć podmiotowe sprawstwo?