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Precarity as a Biographical Problem? Young Workers Living with Precarity in Germany and Poland

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Abstract

In the context of debates on the meanings of precarious employment, this paper explores the varied ways young workers in Poland and Germany are managing precarity. Biographical narrative interviews with 123 young people revealed four different ways interviewees experienced precarity. These different approaches reflected varied ways in which interviewees were orientated to work, the meanings attributed by them to precarious employment and the material and cultural resources they possessed. It is argued that despite institutional differences, precarity in both countries is experienced similarly and represents a tendency to endure precarity and cope with it by individual means. Simultaneously, criticisms of precarity were more typical of young Poles than Germans. Cross-country variances were explained by the different mechanisms of institutional support for young workers and the greater belief in meritocracy in Germany.

Keywords

Insecure employment; precarity; young workers; biographical research; Poland, Germany.

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Introduction

Young workers are disproportionately affected by the precarisation of the labour market: they are systemically disadvantaged in terms of facing a greater risk of poverty, temporary employment and unemployment than the general population (Furlong, 2013; Standing, 2011). Despite this, young people tend to be satisfied with their lives (Eurostat, 2013). Notwithstanding cross-country differences, they rarely engage in conventional protests or collective actions (Andronikidou and Kovras, 2012; Szafraniec, et al., 2017). This paper unpacks this puzzle through exploring the biographical conditions, properties and consequences of precarisation. It presents findings from a qualitative study on how precarisation is experienced and evaluated by young people. How do young people experience and manage employment precarity at the biographical level? Under which conditions is precarity experienced as a biographical problem and, conversely, under which conditions is it not recognised as problematic by those affected? The paper follows a relational understanding of precarity as developed by Dörre (2014: 73) and assumes that employment is precarious ‘if it does not permanently allow for subsistence above a certain cultural and socially defined level’.

While much research on experiences of precarity focus on a single country or occupational group, this analysis adopts a comparative perspective to focus on young people across occupations in two countries with different pathways into employment precarity, different labour market regimes and different welfare state arrangements that protect against precarity. In terms of the varieties of precarity (Scully 2016), in both Poland and Germany, the deregulation of the labour market (Prosser, 2015) and public and managerial discourses promoting flexibility and entrepreneurship (Vallas and Prener 2012) have been the main root for precarisation and pushed a growing number of young people to the periphery of the labour market, with 70.7% of young Poles and 53.2% of young Germans (aged 15-24) being employed in temporary jobs in 2016 (Eurostat LFS, 2019). Both countries have experienced rather low levels of youth unemployment as compared to other EU countries in the recent years: 6.2% in

Germany, 11,8% in Poland as compared to 11,1% in OECD on average for those aged 18-24 (OECD 2019a)

Based on a broad and socially-divergent sample of 123 interviews with young people aged between 18 and 35 years old in Poland and Germany, this paper offers an empirically grounded typology for managing precarity. It is divided in four main parts: (1) it discusses precarisation and the potential theoretical arguments for the apparent acceptance of new labour market conditions and its impact on individual lives; (2) it elaborates on the methods used; (3) it presents the typology of life strategies by precarious young workers developed through cross-case comparisons of the biographical interviews; and (4) conclusions are drawn.

Experiencing Precarity: Literature Review

There is a long-standing but still unresolved debate in the literature on the nature of precarity (Castel, 2000; Dörre, 2014; Standing, 2011; Vosko, 2010). Empirical studies to date either focus on precarity defined solely with respect to the nature of employment conditions - so, following Vosko (2010: 2), precarious employment as ‘work for remuneration characterised by uncertainty, low income and limited social benefits and statutory entitlements’ - or they go beyond job conditions and employment situations to understand precarity as the very foundation of late modern life, especially given shrinking social and state support for individual actions, mirroring what Marchart (2013) talks about in his discussion of the precarisation society. Combining the economic and social aspects of precarity, Castel (2000: 524-525) suggests there are four zones of social life: the integration zone (full-time employed, solid social relationships); the vulnerability zone (insecure work, fragile social relationships); the disaffiliation zone (unemployed, socially excluded); and the assistance zone (the experience of insecurity combined with public support). Both Castel (2000) and Dörre (2014) note that welfare institutions and the standard employment relationship have historically been central measures to protect or immunise (Lorey, 2015) workers from market-driven vulnerability in

Western capitalist countries. In Central and Eastern Europe, a similar ‘immunising’ effect was achieved by state-driven redistribution during authoritarian socialism in 1945-89 (Doellgast, et al., 2018: 17).

While Castel and Dörre consider precarity as a deviation from what is considered standard and normal in a particular society, Lorey (2015: 63) goes one step further and suggests that insecurity itself has become a norm in the West. But how, for whom and under which conditions has precarity become a norm? The existing literature is inconclusive in this respect. On the one hand, Standing (2011) argues that the experience of precarity will ultimately lead to the formation of the ‘precariat’, a new social class ‘in itself’, characterised by a lack of labour security typical of Fordism. From this perspective, young precarious workers represent an avant-garde of social movements that resist both neoliberal order and constraints on autonomy and self-fulfilment in a welfare state founded on standard employment relationship premises (Standing, 2011: 79). Yet, Standing’s work is criticised for overplaying the convergence of class interests of those belonging to the precariat (Wright, 2016). An example of rare empirical validation of the ‘precariat’ thesis is a recent qualitative study on the experience of precarious workers in the UK which concluded that ‘cohesion within and between these groups is overstated, and worker collectivisation far from apparent’ (Manolchev, et al., 2018).

On the other hand, there is an emerging body of work that argues precarity is not perceived by those affected as problematic (see, Bove, et al., 2017; Manske, 2015; Umney and Kretos, 2015). In the existing studies on young precarious workers, two ways of explaining their acceptance of precarity seem to dominate: cultural and generational. The former argues that the hegemonic cultures of late capitalism mediate ways of experiencing precarity and flexibility. For instance, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), as well as scholars inspired by the Italian autonomous Marxists (the *operaismo* school of thought), see the sources of the contemporary ‘new spirit of capitalism’ in the artistic criticism of Fordism in the 1960s emphasising the necessity of autonomy, freedom and authenticity. In neoliberalism,

individualism is further fostered by the ideology of meritocracy, which tends to explain individual achievements solely in terms of individual ‘talents’ and efforts (Littler, 2018), as well as entrepreneurship which encourages employees not just to start their own business, but also to become ‘entrepreneurs of their selves and lives’ (Bove, et al., 2017: 4). This literature suggests that precarity is embraced by young workers for the sake of autonomy and self-fulfilment, as well as the refusal of routine typical of bureaucratic work organisations.

However, there are several shortcomings in such cultural explanations. Much research on precarity-as-choice mainly focuses on the creative sector, such as culture workers (Manske, 2015), musicians (Umney and Kretos, 2015), artists and non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers or knowledge workers (Armano and Murgia, 2017), who are driven by their passion for their profession which is often considered much easier to develop under flexible working arrangements. The research demonstrates that managing precarity even among a narrow category of creative workers is by no means automatic and requires much identity work and an ability to cultivate holding environments in the absence of stable work organisation (Petriglieri, et al., 2019). Even less consensus exists about the ways precarity is experienced among lower skilled workers. Whilst some research demonstrates a tendency to overestimate their level of autonomy by workers, as exemplified by testimonies from self-employed home couriers in the UK (Moore and Newsome, 2018), other studies document the ‘feelings of disempowerment, a profound sense of livelihood insecurity and a crisis of social reproduction’, such as in the case of male migrant taxi drivers in China (Choi, 2018: 493). There is also evidence that cohesive and supportive work and social environments might in some cases mitigate the effects of precarity, as in the case of care workers in the UK (Manolchev, et al., 2018). Yet, these existing studies do not examine the role of discourses of creativity, entrepreneurship and meritocracy for the justification of precarity from a comparative, cross-national perspective.

The generational explanations of the acceptance of precarity focus, in turn, on its perception as a temporary, biographically-irrelevant or even welcomed experience due to the specificity of young people's phase of life. Youth studies see precarity often as a temporary phenomenon related to the so-called stepping stone hypothesis and the changing nature of transitions to adulthood (Giermanowska, 2013). Young people are seen to experiment with various kinds of jobs as an 'enjoyable expression of their identity' (Arnett, 2007: 72). Similarly, another strand of youth studies suggests that regardless of its character (flexible or permanent), employment is merely seen as a means of getting by while biographical identity is built around other activities and social relations beyond work. In the case of so-called millennials, new meanings of work are observed which focus more on individual autonomy, flexibility and distance of authority at work (Hurrelmann and Albrecht, 2014). Yet, there is growing evidence about the negative impact of prolonged precarious employment on other aspects of young people's social life, such as establishing families (Kalleberg, 2018), performing the role of parents (Ba', 2019), leaving the parental home (Slany, 2006) or maintaining friendships (Woodman, 2012).

This paper compares the experiences of precarity among an entire generation of young people in different social milieus from a cross-country perspective. Germany is an example of a coordinated market economy, with a strong system of vocational education and training for young people. Despite the ongoing dualisation of the labour market (Thelen, 2014), the country's welfare system and active labour market policies (ALMP) still provide a security net which is much stronger than is the case with the sub-protective, residual welfare state in post-socialist Poland (Mai, 2018; Giermanowska, 2013). In Poland, with its 'patchwork capitalism' due to the co-existence of non-complementary institutional logics (Rapacki, 2019), disparities between the education system (characterised by a high share of young people with university degrees and a malfunctioning system of vocational training) and labour market demand for lower-skilled employees created a precarity trap for young people (Szafraniec, et al., 2017).

The research presented below explored whether the aforementioned differences at the institutional level were also reflected in the differences in ways of managing precarity in both countries studied.

Methods Taking into account a limited number of studies which explored the ways of experiencing and coping with precarity from worker-centred and cross-country perspectives, the empirical study was based on biographical narrative interviews (Schütze, 1983) combined with grounded theory methodology (Glaser, 1978). Each interview started with a request for the complete story of narrators' lives from childhood to the present moment followed by additional biographical questions. A semi-structured interview guide was also used so that the same questions in both countries about the experience of work and the informants' ideas about decent work, a good life, social relations, social activities and class identifications could be explored.

The research began in 2016 and focused on collecting interviews with people aged 18-35 whose work situation deviated from the norm (as defined in Poland and Germany by having an open-ended, full-time job covered by social security and minimum wage). Precarity was captured as: (1) having non-standard employment contracts, such as contracts of limited duration, contracts with temporary work agencies, civil law contracts, 'mini jobs' and marginal part-time jobs; (2) being involved in transitional labour market programmes or unpaid traineeships; and (3) being unemployed following a previous experience of a non-standard employment contract. 123 interviews were completed - 60 in Germany and 63 in Poland - and interviews lasted from 50 minutes to 4 hours. Interviews were conducted in cities of different size (five in Germany, seven in Poland, including the capitals of both countries). Attention was paid to age and gender, collecting equal numbers among 18-24 and 25-35 years' cohorts and men and women. The sample included parents and non-parents, those with migration backgrounds and those without and those with a higher education and those without. It covered

a broad range of occupational sectors. Recognising the precarious nature of the working poor on open-ended contracts, there were nine cases of full-time workers earning less than two-thirds of the median wage in the sample.

Data analysis was undertaken on full transcriptions of the interviews. For each interview, a biographical summary was produced. All 123 cases were analysed by national teams and, additionally, 20 core cases were translated into English for joint analysis during a series of workshops. Analysis followed the procedures of grounded theory methodology (Glaser, 1978) aimed at fracturing data into codes inspired both by theoretical sensitivity and meanings attributed to their working and non-working lives by informants. Each interview was coded line-by-line and codes for each interview were compared. The first codes used to organise the data were broad and ranged from ‘being a wanted or unwanted child’ to ‘having supportive family’, ‘investing in education and skills’, ‘building up social relations’, ‘planning’ or ‘losing control over one’s life’. Later, the relationships and patterns among them were explored that helped explain the perception of precarity using the procedures of selective coding. Categories were grouped into three dimensions that shaped the experience of precarity: (1) the biographical relevance of work in the context of overall life experiences; (2) the subjective experiences and meaning of objectively precarious employment; and (3) the role of various resources as means of immunisation against precarity, including economic capital, education and skills, social networks and biographical resources.

The result of the analysis is a typology of the different ways young people are coping with precarity (see Table 1 below). The typology attempted to capture the extent to which interviewees were suffering from employment precarity rather passively or trying to overcome it actively and what level of resources they had for coping. Six initial types were identified. For a deeper analysis, other factors structuring the interviewees’ biographies were explored, such as expectations of work and life, the ways of fulfilling life projects and dealing with biographical problems. This broader approach captured the individual sources for employment

precarity as well as the impact of more existential experiences on precarity and the different types of resources for coping. In order to reduce complexity, analytical reduction and abstraction techniques were used to reach the final four types. It is assumed that individuals can move across various types over their life time:

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Findings: A Typology of Coping with Precarity

Type 1: Workerist - Precarious Labourers and Precarious Professionals

This first category was inspired by the tradition of autonomous Marxists and emphasised the interviewee's desire to be employed in stable, well-paid work within standardised working hours and with well-defined career prospects. There were two subtypes here: (1) precarious labourers, with a relatively lower level of formal education, or 'stuck' in manual or semi-manual jobs despite formally better educational credentials; and (2) precarious professionals who perform white-collar jobs and possess objectively higher cultural capital both in terms of formal education and aspirations to middle-class life styles.

Due to the different role of cultural capital, work was interpreted differently by precarious labourers and professionals. For the former, it occupied a central place in informants' lives as a means of social integration, of personal identification and as a way of acquiring necessary economic resources to fulfil goals beyond the sphere of work. An important value in this sphere was meaningful social bonds. Consequently, precarity was experienced predominantly in terms of economic and work-related uncertainty, as well as the risk of disaffiliation referring to a breakdown of 'a system of relationships, within which they can reproduce their existence on an emotional and social level' (Castel, 2000: 520). The feeling that 'people can destroy you in this town', mentioned by Julita, a shop assistant in a small Polish

neighbourhood, was one of many expressions of alienation and loneliness found in the stories collected.

For precarious professionals, work had mostly an autotelic value, but it was also seen as a source of social status, involving higher income, standardised working hours, predictable career paths and decent earnings. It resembled an ideal type of bureaucratic work organisation, although the dreamed job did not need to be office-based. The reality of working life, however, was characterised by experiences of insecurity and often instability mostly resulting from the precarisation of professional jobs and employment in the public sector. Precarious professionals tended to endure precarity as a necessary experience in the labour market, a period of trial and error that eventually would lead, so they hoped, to stable employment. This was the case for Lena, an academic in sociology, who accepted insecurity whilst finishing her PhD due to a lack of family duties, but was hoping for more security in the future:

There is a basic insecurity not to know where you are going to be in 3 or 4 years. It would be even worse if I had the wish to have children or if I had a definite goal where to live, which isn't the case at the moment. So... you never feel at home anywhere and never come along anywhere (F, 30, DE).

The resources to protect or ‘immunise’ oneself against precarity also differed across the subtypes. For Polish and German labourers, occupational flexibility was not accepted, but adapted to and coped with mostly by searching for stability and building up social relations in other, non-work domains of life. Some interviewees also referred to the self-limitation of needs and aspirations as a means of coping with precarity. This was the case for Mesut, a 20 year old trainee in the field of electrical engineering, who expressed his dreams about working at Siemens:

I think you can scrape by, no matter what you get, because you adjust yourself to it. That you can forgo some things maybe, that you don't really...of course you have needs that you want to take care of, but there are things that you don't need in reality, necessarily... I got a really small car, don't pay a lot of taxes, insurance is also extremely cheap...that is totally enough for me (M, 20, DE).

In other cases, a frequently appearing identification of the ‘good life’ with a loving family and good relationships rather than work could be interpreted as a compensation mechanism for precarity. If instability was tolerated within this type, it was because of disbelief in individual and collective abilities aimed at changing the interviewees’ situation within the labour market. Even though the potential for a critique of precarity within the labourers’ type was rather limited, there were cases where it emerged. In the Polish sample, two workers became union members motivated by the need for immediate protection and to access the union’s social services. These happenings constitute a pragmatic version of collectivism.

For professionals, the main way to immunise against precarity was ongoing efforts to invest in educational resources which reflected their belief in meritocracy. Another way to immunise was to invest in useful social networks in the sphere of work which were seen as the means to find a better, more stable job. Yet, in other cases, the ‘status incongruence’, reflected in the discrepancy between the level of education or, more broadly, professional aspirations and economic rewards, also led to a critique of precarity. This was stronger in the older cohort of informants (25-35 years old) who expected self-fulfilment from their jobs and were unwilling to pay the price of precarious employment arrangements. Janina, a 29 year old prison psychologist who worked part-time in two prisons and in additional manual jobs to supplement her family income, openly said:

I have never been afraid of work. I worked in customer services by phone, in greengrocer’s shop...I cleaned toilets in the workshop, so to say Mrs Psychologist took on an uniform and run with a rag to scour the toilets (...) Since the last year I also started to work half-time in the remand centre (...) I still earn as little as when I worked in the bookshop but there is much bigger responsibility. I develop, fulfil myself in it but, still, I feel unsatisfied, really unsatisfied (F, 29, PL).

Young people in the workerist type experienced precarity as a general condition of the contemporary labour market that needed to be individually managed and adjusted to. Emergent discontent with precarity was rare, especially in the German sample. If it did appear, it did so

within the context of the continuity of precarious conditions as individuals got older, their security net of social support was malfunctioning and/or their efforts to overcome it by securing higher education did not bring expected results.

Type 2: Post-Workerist - Precarious Creatives and Precarious Bricoleurs

A common feature of the second type, the post-workerist, was that its representatives intentionally questioned the biographical relevance of stable, secure, long-term employment. Instead, they opted in their coping strategies for autonomy and freedom of constraints connected with a ‘normal’ Fordist biography. Consequently, they chose careers shaped by short-term projects in the arts, culture or NGOs or small, individual entrepreneurship. Again, there were two subtypes: (1) precarious creatives (with high biographical relevance of cultural capital); and (2) precarious bricoleurs (with limited relevance of cultural capital).

For precarious creatives, work was expected to be purposeful, fulfilling, inspiring and most of all flexible. Their biographies expressed ‘the new spirit of capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Flexibility was perceived as an expected norm and a chance for escaping from routinised ‘eight-hour shift’ jobs. They were antagonistic towards working for big international corporations as restricting their options for autonomy, although they also saw such employment as a potential safety net should they encounter biographical difficulties. Some crucial characteristics of the type were outlined by Alicja, a cultural animator in an NGO in a small Polish village:

I feel free here (...) Hell, I am a bit idealist, I live my dreams and we are starting a new project as well, also here... There is not much business thinking in it all, it was never about that, maybe that is why I do not earn a lot and I do not work in places where salaries are high, but it gives me a great satisfaction, no? So I will probably continue with this self-employment in NGOs (F, 29, PL).

The precarity resulting from it was treated in an ambivalent way. For some, it was seen as a necessary cost for ‘doing what one loves’ or, as Petriglieri and colleagues (2019) found

among high skilled self-employed people, for doing something purposeful; for others it was a transitional period, eventually leading to a position that would enable unfettered choice from interesting and adequately paid projects. This ambivalence was expressed by Katarina, a 27 year old ballet dancer working on seasonal contracts:

I'm definitely not a big fan of big companies (...) If it's possible in my, em-, utopian world, in my Eden, to have that paid every month [laughing]. So, would be a freelancer and all the time searching for the job, but having a place and being able to perform... (F, 27, DE).

Despite their acceptance of flexible work arrangements, some creatives also mentioned emergent problems in achieving a balance between work-related commitments and personal life beyond work. Blurred boundaries between working and non-working life were mentioned, *inter alia*, by Szymon, a Polish architect working on involuntary part-time contracts, as an obstacle to planning a family with his partner who was employed in a cultural institution and frequently worked weekends and in the evenings. Similarly, Marlen, a part-time NGO worker in a German city, said that stable relationships were constraining with regards to the mobility required in the sector she worked in, yet she would wish to build one in the future.

While for creatives work had an autotelic value, in the case of bricoleurs, the instrumental meaning of work came into prominence. The term *bricolage*, used by Lévi-Strauss (1968: 17), captures the activity of someone who has to perform a variety of diverse tasks but does so with ‘the means at hand’ for new purposes. As such, for precarious bricoleurs, resourcefulness was perceived as an important value that went in hand with a strong sense of agency. These characteristics were visible in Pedro’s interview, a student employed at a food delivery service, and earning money by renting out three rooms in his apartment:

I’m looking for an idea for a business. That is also a plan, it is still a plan because it is not real yet until I get it. And finding a business that I can do with other people, because Airbnb is actually going well. Could be like buying an apartment, buying a piece, making a hostel, which is not so expensive anymore and is still affordable (M, 27, DE).

Bricoleurs tended to associate work mostly with its economic dimension and work-related identity or community were of lesser importance. The main way to immunise against precarity was a strong reliance upon individual entrepreneurship and resourcefulness as opposed to relying on state support and protection. Here, precarity was sometimes perceived as the necessary cost of being independent from an employer, and from the support of family or state. Lacking stable employment was seen as fair payment for the freedom to leave such employment, as exemplified in Paweł's interview, a 21 year old assistant carpenter:

I have never had long seniority at work [laughing]. (...) 'I don't need to work [in this workplace]', as I always remind my employer if he criticises me (...) I want to make good money, and I know that I'm able to do it, I only need to put down my laziness and motivate myself (M, 21, PL).

For both kinds of post-workerist type, strong individualism provides a crucial means of immunisation against precarity. In the case of creatives, the experiences of the precarious side of creativity and freedom usually involved the growing professionalisation of creative work and individual up-skilling efforts. Another mechanism was to maintain useful and valuable social contacts with other creatives which fostered a 'holding environment' (see Petriglieri's, et al., 2019) and became a way to immunise against precarity and the spaces of cooperation and competition for the sake of current and future projects (see Manske, 2015; Szreder, 2016). However, among the creatives in the Polish sample, there were cases of involvement or, at least, active support for social and political initiatives striving to counteract precarisation. For instance, Marcin, an architect working on non-standard and low paid contracts, says that he decided to join the 'Together' political party advocating for the interests of precarious workers. Interestingly, this sort of mobilisation was less visible among German creatives, who tried to pursue their desired profession or activity by individual means.

The experience of precarity in the post-workerist type was shaped by the tension between the objective situation of the lack of employment stability and the subjective preference for flexible, autonomous/independent working conditions. Even though some of

its representatives criticised precarity, much more typical were individualistic strategies aimed at adjusting oneself to flexible working conditions reflecting their belief in the value of autonomy, professional skills and entrepreneurship.

Type 3: Precarious Blocked

The blocked type is characterised by an awareness of precarious working conditions which one would neither like to end up with nor is capable of escaping. The life stories in the blocked type record high levels of aspiration for either employment stability or professional self-fulfilment, but unlike those in the two earlier types, interviewees were unable and/or unwilling to adapt to the flexible world of work. Economic and cultural resources were usually limited and some informants were trapped either in the vocational education system (in Germany) or by too limited institutional assistance in the transition from school to the labour market (in Poland).

Informants within the blocked type explicitly criticised precarious employment but they did not undertake any steps to achieve a secure working biography and, thus, remained locked in their unstable life situations. Robert, for example, a 23 year old without any vocational education and training, was in a transitional labour market programme for a number of years already and openly admitted that ‘the employment agency (...) gives me more security than if I would just throw myself into the job market’.

Informants within the blocked type found themselves in a situation where they objectively lacked opportunities and enabling resources and their belief in individual agency was rather limited. A good example of the blocked type in the German sample was the case of Marcel, a 23 year old retail trainee who, due to personal problems, found it difficult to complete his vocational training:

In 2013 I started my vocational training. Yeah and since then I did my training, uh, until the end of 2015 then I moved to B-city, because my girlfriend and I had met there at that time, she was pregnant (...) and then last year there was the miscarriage which really threw me for a loop (...) I had these blockades in my head and (...) I couldn't concentrate

at all and then I honestly had to discontinue my vocational training and said to myself that I need some space for a while (M, 23, DE).

Even though longing for security concerned both the sphere of work and the life beyond it, the adaptation and mediation between the two were hard to handle because the demands related to them were seen as fundamentally contradicting each other. In addition, there were conditions outside the world of work that had to be solved first and therefore blocked other activities, as in the case of Helena, a 19 year old shop assistant in a small Polish city. Coming from an economically-deprived family and suffering from depression, she said: ‘I can’t cope with myself, with my past and present, with this in which I’m stuck in’.

The informants within the blocked type tended to interpret their situation by externalising the sources of its misery. This ranged from blaming other individuals (parents and/or institutional gatekeepers) to criticising institutional structures. Blockers may acknowledge structural conditions but this did not lead to resistance. Instead, it helped to de-individualise and shift the source of precarity away from individual agency towards the system that was perceived as responsible for the precarisation of work and life which could make suffering from precarity less profound. Alternatively, psychological terms were used to explain individual misfortunes (often framed in the language of therapy which some attended).

Type 4: Precarious Withdrawn

The precarious withdrawn type was defined by an individual’s distance to the world of regular employment which had lost - or never acquired - biographical significance as a result of experiencing, facing and fearing employment precarity. The ‘withdrawns’ tended to retreat from precarious working life into early parenthood and care work, into new social and communitarian spaces de-linked from employment, into the illegal or informal world of employment or they embraced de-commodified ways of self-supporting through the subsistence economy or new forms of cooperatives. Although vagrants, welfare recipients and causal

workers existed long before precarity was studied, and could be considered to have some overlap with young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) (OECD 2019b), precarious withdrawal represents a new life strategy since it is conceived by narrators as a way of escaping externally-imposed precarity by refusing the mode of social integration through occupational career-based formal, gainful employment, be it in Fordist or post-Fordist organisations.

In the withdrawn type, the retreat from working life was seen as an unproblematic liberation from precarity, obligations and control. For some, these withdrawals are forms of resisting, where workers change the conditions by not accepting them (Moisander, et al., 2017; Virno, 2005). This distanced approach to work was visible in the narrative of Artjom, a 22 year old private security worker in the black economy: ‘I am basically doing nothing. I don’t need to breathe in any crap like I used to do at the construction site (...) I am always dressed well, like we drive around in nice cars. I basically don’t do anything. I sit in the warm’. Regular, stable jobs were seen as limiting individual autonomy and freedom which resulted in reframing the lack of stable jobs as biographically irrelevant. An example could be found in the arguments put forward by Dawid, who was formally in NEET status doing free driving licence training and informally worked in a restaurant:

My mindset doesn’t allow me to be an average person who goes to work every day, works in a factory for 20 years, retires and gets PLN 700. That’s not for me. Someone once said that it is not for me to be anyone (M, 24, PL).

For ‘withdrawns’, the world of work did not offer integration, so some of them were longing for alternative forms of community. In cases where these communities existed, they were a way to immunise against precarity. The withdrawn logic was represented in the cases of those who decided to leave the path of corporate or NGO careers and start a new life aimed at self-fulfilment in alternative communities and projects. Małgorzata decided to leave a well-paid job in a large foundation to join a group of friends and develop a brewing cooperative. Noah, in the

German sample, was an even more radical case. He wanted to live in the countryside, self-sustaining with a garden plot and a little workshop, or buy a bus and travel around the world. He had these experiences before where he travelled around for two years by bike and lived voluntarily more or less on the street without any money:

I had a totally different lifestyle. I was juggling on the street, for money as well, lived by dumpster diving. I really had a different lifestyle, I didn't need much money and it was alright. It was okay to sleep outside. It was the way I wanted to live (M, 29, DE).

A different way of (temporarily) escaping from precarity could be found in the narratives of those who retreated to early parenthood to avoid uncertainty in the labour market, all of whom had lower education levels and were in the younger segment (18-24) of the sample. While in Poland, two unemployed parents living off social benefits would hardly get by, in the German sample there were cases of voluntarily-chosen, longer periods of parenthood supported by the existing welfare system. Parenthood served as a buffer to escape from the needs and pressures of the labour market.

Discussion and Conclusion

Addressing the question of the perception of precarity, this research suggests that it is accepted, legitimised or endured by the vast majority of our sample across Poland and Germany. Precarity is perceived as an individual affair which not only shakes off its structural components, but also contributes to the demobilisation of young Poles and Germans. Consequently, young people in both countries do not resemble the avant-garde, ‘dangerous class’ (Standing, 2011). While Standing (2011: 66) assumed that young people ‘make up the core of the precariat and will have to take the lead in forging a viable future for it’, this research shows that the way young adults cope with precarity will not lead to politicisation. Instead, it ends in an acceptance of precarity or an escape from work (unless we acknowledge forms of exit as practices of resistance and revolt (see Moisander, et al., 2017; Virno, 2005)).

Regarding the question about the conditions in which precarity is experienced as a biographical problem and when is it perceived as unproblematic, the research suggests that both cultural and generational explanations can account for the relative biographical irrelevance of precarity. This study offers an extension of ‘cultural’ explanations which focus on the workers’ need for autonomy, freedom and self-fulfilment (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Bove, et al., 2017) by noting their relevance for the ways of managing precarity beyond creative and cultural workers’ milieus, including lower (formally) educated self-employed people in the ‘bricolage’ type. The research also supports ‘generational’ accounts for the acceptance of precarity which explain it in terms of the specificity of young people’s phase of life (Arnett, 2007). However, the research does show that the precarious young do not consider this as a structural phenomenon but a condition that can only be overcome by individual effort and investment. It points to the relevance of the discourses of meritocracy and entrepreneurship which accompanied labour market changes both in Poland and Germany (Littler, 2018; Trappmann, 2013). Accordingly, being trapped in precarity is seen as the result of individual failures. This explains why there is no collective action against it.

Contrary to ‘generational’ explanations, the study confirms the perpetuating nature of precarity. Over half of the informants who experienced precarious working conditions are 25-35 years old. As they grew older, a tendency to question the transitory nature of their unstable living and working conditions increased. Precarity becomes problematic if economic and employment insecurity is combined with the lack of supportive social networks and various other biographical problems (malfunctioning health, family problems, broken intimate relations, for example). Even in the majority of cases where precarity is not perceived as a biographical problem, it still shapes the lives of young people in manifold ways, causing psychological disturbances (‘blockers’), questioning the linkages between educational resources and social status (‘professionals’), making meaningful community bonds more difficult to sustain (‘labourers’) or objectively disturbing the balance between work and life

beyond it ('creatives'). The critique of precarity is more likely found in the case of those who, in the course of their earlier biographical or educational experiences, developed some forms of political consciousness which helped frame their individual problems in systemic terms.

Building upon Castel's (2000: 525) zone model of social life, the analysis suggests that an important mechanism for managing precarity is building up social networks and cultivating social relations. Family, friendships and good workplace relations in professional and private life are relevant ways of minimising the negative aspects of precarity across all six subtypes in both countries, echoing similar results in earlier studies (Bourdieu 2002; Manolchev, et al., 2018; Petriglieri, et al., 2019). Important mechanisms of immunisation against precarity are still welfare state institutions. Even in the case of those who voluntarily withdraw themselves from the zone of gainful and formal employment, the welfare state provides a protective context within which their life strategies can unfold. This is more so in the case of the German 'coordinated market economy' than in the 'patchwork capitalism' of Poland (Rapacki, 2019) and, thus, the acceptance or normalisation of precarity among young Poles is less accentuated than in the case of young Germans. While criticism against precarity might be found in both countries, the readiness to mobilise precarity has in general been greater in Poland. Social welfare institutions in Germany, as well as a stronger belief in meritocracy and the German vocational system, make young Germans more likely to consider precarity as a transitional phase. In Poland, the discourses of the market and entrepreneurship, and the sub-protective welfare state (Giermanowska, 2013), leave young people more alone in coping with precarious conditions and less reliant on institutional support than on their individual abilities and bricolage-like resourcefulness. This, in turn, points to the relevance of institutional explanations of the acceptance of precarity.

While contributing to the existing research on the experiences of precarity, this study also has some limitations. Firstly, it was limited to two European countries where protest was relatively weak. It would be beneficial to study how precarity is framed, experienced and

managed in countries with higher levels of collective mobilisation against it. Secondly, there is a need to analyse in more detail the biographies of those who were involved in various forms of social protests, including trade union and political actions, to grasp better the role of precarity experiences as compared to other factors that contributed to social activism. Thirdly, it would be useful to extend the research into countries with much higher levels of youth unemployment than Poland and Germany to explore further the differences in the ways of managing precarity. Fourthly, comparative research on older as well as younger workers would add a better understanding of the role of generational factors.

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Table 1: The Logics of Coping with Precarious Employment

Type	Subtype				Specificity of work	Relevance of Work	Experience of Precarity	Resources for Immunisation against Precarity				
Workerist Type	LABOURERS				Manual or semi-manual jobs	Orientation at Fordist Order	Suffering from disaffiliation Economic uncertainty	Economic self-limitation Building up social relations Investing in skills/education Pragmatic collectivism (PL)				
	PL (14)		DE (14)									
	F	M	F	M								
	7	7	5	9								
	18-24	25-35	18-24	25-35								
	11	3	6	8								
	PROFESSIONALS				Professional jobs	Orientation at Fordist Order	Endured but not accepted Stepping stone	Belief in meritocracy Investing in social networks				
	PL (20)		DE (17)									
	F	M	F	M								
	15	5	10	7								

	18-24	25-35	18-24	25-35			Critique of status incongruence (mainly PL)			
	4	16	9	8						
Post-Workerist Type	CREATIVES				Project-based work	Orientation at Post-Fordist Order	Normalised as a price of autonomy Stepping stone Work-life balance problems			
	PL (12)		DE (13)							
	F	M	F	M						
	6	6	8	5						
	18-24	25-35	18-24	25-35						
	1	11	6	7						
	BRICOLEURS				Self-employment	Orientation at Post-Fordist Order	Normalised as a price for autonomy			
	PL (7)		DE (3)							
	F	M	F	M						
	2	5	1	2						
	18-24	25-35	18-24	25-35						
	7	0	0	3						
Blocked Type	BLOCKED				No Specific profile	Disorientation Regarding Work	Suffering psychological distress Externalisation			
	PL (7)		DE (7)							
	F	M	F	M						
	3	4	1	6						
	18-24	25-35	18-24	25-35						
	4	3	5	2						
Withdrawn Type	WITHDRAWN				No Specific profile	Refusal to Orient Oneself at Work	Retreat into decommodified enclaves, early parenthood, illegality Critique without resistance			
	PL (3)		DE(6)							
	F	M	F	M						
	2	1	5	1						
	18-24	25-35	18-24	25-35						
	1	2	2	4						