Biographical Experience of Work by Young Precarious Workers in Poland[1]

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Abstract

Young workers are the category of people who experience precarity and precariousness the most. This article explores the work experiences of the young precarious workers as an important component of constructing their social identity. It focuses on the problems with sense of professional identity, biographical sense of work experiences and the processes of transition to adulthood in the context of insecure earnings and permanent uncertainty. It also deals with the lack of control over time and future life plans and the alienation of work. As a consequence of precariousness, young people need to cope with traps of uncertainty, poverty and helplessness. The article is based on the analysis of biographical interviews with young people aged 18-30 years old in low-paid temporary jobs, low paid open-ended contracts, traineeships and the unemployed. The whole collection contains 70 interviews.

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The article focuses on ten cases which represent more general properties of work experiences. The analysis enables us to address emerging questions concerning the relationships between constructing biography and the experience of work and to formulate tentative conclusions from the ongoing research.

Introduction

The unfavourable macroeconomic tendencies are manifested mainly through the uncertainty of employment. Increasingly, the labour market offers forms of employment that do not guarantee stable career pathway. The precarisation of the labour market is a fact of life. Gradually, stable employment is being pushed out of the labour market. For workers, this means a state of uncertainty which is related to the fear of losing paid job. On the other hand, another type of work is sought after. Part and parcel of it is 'work-for-labour', which is necessary but does not bring any direct financial value and consists of time-consuming project form-filling, getting certificates or seeking for a job (Standing 2011: 120). This has significant consequences for the development and planning of the individual professional career pathway, which is being fragmented. Thus, employment is not connected with economic and professional stability. And the experience of work is often generating the 'working poor' categories, which are, in general, related to the category of precariousness. This means that young precarians, despite being in paid work, cannot save money and hold permanent employment. The experiences of work of the youth are conditioned on the one hand by the processes of normalisation of precariousness (Mrozowicki 2016). On the other hand, they are shaped by the conditions of neoliberal economic model where it is hard to bring about the ideals of solidarity and social justice. These processes are related to the rapid pace of changes, intertwining of regimes and rules, and globalisation of influences and threats (Bauman 2000, Beck 1992). As a result, we are dealing with such deficiencies of the labour market as the expansion of low-paid and uncertain employment, which makes it harder to achieve satisfying status on the labour market, This makes getting and retaining work a difficult business.

This paper attempts at capturing the biographical experience of work. It is based on empirical material collected during the PREWORK research project which studies young precarious workers from Poland and Germany. The empirical analysis for this paper is based on 10 case studies out of 70 biographical narrative interviews with the youth aged 18 to 30 from Poland. All of these subjects were in low-paid,

temporary contracts or have experienced long-term unemployment. The interviews were conducted between 2016 and 2017 in towns and cities with diverse situation on the local labour markets. In this article, we are asking questions about analytical categories that are crucial to the biographical experiencing of work that emerge from the first stages of data analysis. The purpose of our endeavor is to show the analytical pathway leading to the isolation of properties characterising relationships between the biography construction process and the experience of work.

Biographical Experience of Work

Biographical experience of work, understood as an analytical category, is a difficult to grasp and an ambiguous concept which needs to be clarified (cf. Domecka 2010). The experience of work has a biographical aspect, which is manifested in the process of common-sense reasoning in everyday life. The experience of work takes the shape of motivations to act, choices to make, projects to plan or goals to achieve. Its definition can be concretised through theoretical concepts elaborated by Alfred Schütz. The main focus of his research is on the stock of knowledge. It arises out of the necessity to perceive the world as ordered and is comprised of 'thought constructs' with their own structure of relevance and a given meaning. The stock of knowledge is a scheme of reference, a basis for the interpretation of all the experiences of an individual. 'This type of knowledge is constructed in accordance with the adopted 'system of relevance' rooted in a given 'biographical situation'. The 'system of relevance' specifies the elements that may become points of departure for a 'generalised typification'. The intersubjective character of the common sense knowledge is made possible by the idealisation that lay the basis for 'natural predisposition' which contributes to the sense of 'reciprocity of perspectives': 'the idealisation of the reciprocity of perspectives' and 'agreement of the relevance systems' (Malewska-Szałygin 1995: 54, trans. WF).

The point is to study the social sources of knowledge and the process of growing into it. This knowledge is visible in language, culture, classifications and typifications that may reveal themselves through biographical narrations. A common, subjective world of individuals is created during interactions. This is referred to as intersubjectivity by Schütz (1954: 263). Such interactions occur during the biographical narrative interviews from the research project that we are basing ourselves upon. When interacting with others, people are adopting the principle of

reciprocity of perspectives (Schütz 1954: 269). Thus, they are treating others as if they were holding the same kind and volume of the stock of knowledge. Any particular differences in life experiences and stock of knowledge become irrelevant. The same goes for biographical differences, since the reality is typified (Schütz 1954: 267). Those typifications are classifying different conducts into types that are similar. Thus making it easier for the individuals to act in social world. Schütz calls these typifications 'biographically-determined situations. Thus, typifications depend on the problem at hand' (Schütz 1954: 267). Such typifications can be seen in the biographies of precarious workers. Their stock of knowledge is translated into their experiences of work in the everyday life.

According to Schütz, the life world is an intersubjective reality given in the natural predisposition to a conscious man (2008: 21) who can experience and interpret it. The life world is intersubjective and structured. At the same time, from the onset it is a social cultural world in which an individual is interrelated in manifold ways of interaction with fellow-men known to him in varying degrees of intimacy and anonymity (Schütz 1954: 268). It is 'preceded by pre-interpretation and pre-selection of meanings related to our being in the community' (Badura 2013: 10, trans. WF). This is because '[a]ll interpretation of this world is based on a stock of previous experiences of it, our own or those handed down to us by parents or teachers, these experiences in the form of 'knowledge at hand' functioning as a scheme of reference' (Schütz 1953: 4). Basing ourselves on the empirical material, we are attempting to determine the meaning of common sense experience of work which exists in human subjectivity and its conscious reference to the world.

The biographical experience of work can be captured through biographies and actions resulting from work. The experience constitutes a world life which is a subjectively-conceived world of everyday life connected with work. The latter is a place where the market forces are at play and identities are shaped. Hidden norms and social divisions suggest that work is not a mere commodity typically employed in purely economic exchanges, but rather a form of a search of oneself and one's place within the society. If so, the workers not only sell their labour, but also express themselves as workers. These issues have both social, as well as emotional and economic impact. A worker is not a mere resource, but a member of other social groups and a carrier for other social roles. The workers are members of families, peer groups, and local communities. They are thus exposed to the stres of combining the roles of a worker and a family member and those related to other duties they hold to their local communities (Kozek 2014: 57). As a part of life, work is connected with feelings such as the sense of being useful and social identification (Ibid.). Work

confers an existential and political meaning, which is related to the culture of a given society. That is why the biographical experience of work expresses values pertaining to ideational sphere, interactions and social networks.

The Categories of Biographical Experience of Work

With the aid of the categories of biographical experience of work we are attempting to capture some of the problems that emerge from the analysed empirical data. The precarious employment creates categories of experience related to problems with lack of opportunities for the development of professional identity, insecurity in the global capitalism, wage uncertainty, loss of personal, political, economic, social and cultural rights in comparison to other social classes (Lorey 2015; Strzelecki 2012; Gdula 2014). The difficulties with the experience of precarious work as a life world also include: no control over the time, processes of alienation of labour, overqualification at work, uncertain life, exposure to the trap of poverty (cf. Szarfenberg 2016), problems with transitioning into adulthood, and transformations of inner workings of groups, communities and trade unions. In the present paper we will focus on three thematic frames out of the above-mentioned set of categories that define the experience of precarious work. The initial analyses of the selected cases have revealed the following categories of challenges: problems with constructing professional identity, transitioning into adulthood, family, work and alienation of labour.

The choice of categories for analysis is related to the context of transformations on the labour market. The employment (both that based on a regular job contract and out of it) is interrupted by periods of unemployment. The latter often serve as time dedicated to the acquisition of new professional competences (Beck 1992: 89). Thus, as described by Sennett (1998) and Castells (2004), we see individuals drifting on the labour market from one employment to another and experiencing more often horizontal than vertical movements (Marody 2015: 137). The increased mobility and professional flexibility makes it harder to identify with the profession. A member of the individualised society is pushed by the required flexibility, 'on pain of permanent disadvantage, to conceive himself or herself as a center of action, as a planning office with respect to his/her own biography, abilities, orientations, relationships and so on' (Beck 1992: 135). This is related to the category of adulthood. Transitioning into adulthood is often an individualised project, which is link with the redefinition of meaning of work over the course of biography. Alienation of work is another category

upon which the analysis of biographical experience of work was constructed. This refers to a situation where the process of self-actualisation is distorted and the products of work are alienated (Rąb 2016). This means less control of the individual over their activities.

A Methodological Note

Our analysis of biographical experience of work is based on biographical interviews collected by the PREWORK team members. What follows is a preliminary analysis and includes only the Polish interviews. The method developed by Fritz Schütze (1983) was employed for conducting interviews. In the first part of the conversation, the narrators were invited to tell their life stories from childhood to the present. After the conclusion of the first part, the respondents were asked questions about their life stories. Finally, questions were asked about the transition from school to work, the experience of work and private life, social activism and political views.

The sample comprised people aged 18 to 30 who had experienced non-standard contracts, precarious forms of employment and temporary unemployment. Theoretical sampling (Glaser 1978) was used. It allowed for combining the analysis of the collected materials with generation of categories which then served to select further interviewees. The sample was picked from towns that differed in two ways. First, their economic situation (that included, among other things, the level of unemployment). Second, their size. Large cities included Warszawa, Łódź and Wrocław, Middle-sized towns included Wałbrzych or Radom, Small towns were represented by such places as Międzylesie or Szydłowiec. The interviewees were recruited through the network of peers, by sending traditional letters, using social media, and various institutions of the labour market (such as the Voluntary Labour Corps or job intermediaries).

Problems With the Construction of Professional Identity

A term 'profession' suggest a 'distinct set of repeatedly performed actions with a determined social usefulness that constitute the basis for living of those who perform the profession and contributing to their social status' (Domański 1996: 7,

trans. WF). A profession is based on certain qualifications and skills. It is being practiced in order to earn a living. A profession is identified by the stock of knowledge and expertise that operate in a biographically determined situation and in the sociocultural milieu. 'This biographically determined situation includes certain possibilities of future practical or theoretical activities which shall be briefly called 'the purpose at hand' (Schütz 1953: 6). This 'purpose at hand' defines those elements contained in such a situation which are relevant to the individual (ibidem). This is clearly seen in biographical planning of the respondents who cope with uncertainty on the labour market related to the gradual withering away of traditional, full-time jobs. These are over time substituted by temporary occupations which are performed by individuals who are not permanently attached to any profession (Gray 1998, quoted in: Domański 2015: 62). Those on temporary contracts can hardly be ascribed to any social class (Domański 2015: 62). Another consequence of the temporary nature of work is the lack of sense of group identity, de-personalisation and 'fragmentation' of professional roles. As a result of the latter, we are witnessing the decomposition of social roles (Ibidem). All this means that the form of work has ceased to determine a strictly specified, life-long professional career pathway. As pointed out by Richard Sennett, 'The most tangible sign of that change might be the motto "No long term". In work, the traditional career progressing step by step through the corridors of one or two institutions is withering' (1998: 22).

Therefore, professional identity is also suffering processes of fragmentation and discontinuation. It has ceased to provide the sense of continuity and satisfaction resulting from the sense of belonging to a specific professional group. That is because identity is undermined by precarious forms of employment. The precarisation of employment inhibits professional development and differentiates pathways of professional career, thus making the development within a social role of a profession in a workplace more difficult .

As regards precarians, the performed profession is not always identical to the received professional training. They change jobs many times (Paweł), which causes problems with the construction of professional identity. The work they do often does not correspond to their level of education, and their current occupation is of an accidental nature. To give an example, Radek has a degree, but works in a large format shop. In such cases work is treated instrumentally, as a 'temporary stage' that allows to earn living and balance on the surface of social life without any guarantee of settling down. Searching for a place to settle down in the society or redefinitions of professional identity hold, in turn, a potential for changing strategies of biographical

construction and identities of those that experience precarious work. Ela, a 22 years old bar tender, says:

Ela: 'I wouldn't stand working for 40 years in the same way, in the same office, on the same chair, with the same computer, and doing exactly the same things every day. I get bored with my job after three months and after three months I want to quit it and find a new one'.

Ela is a young woman. She dropped out of the university right at the beginning of her education. She is trying to find her place and is very much focused on herself. She is a bar tender, first she worked abroad and now she is working back in Poland. Her words confirm a strong relationship between the processes of precarisation at work and the construction of professional identity. On the basis of analysed material, it can be claimed that instability can be the living condition of young people who are incorporating the rule of 'casualisation' into their life projects by pointing to the boring and monotonous character of working at a single place and doing the same things while simultaneously appreciating the opportunities for continuous change. We are witnessing a redefinition of professional role away from the construction and stabilisation of identity as such. However, we cannot conclude that profession holds no influence over the identification in the society. In precarious conditions, both work and profession become parts of 'fragile existence' (Butler 2004) which extends into other spheres of life and in fact can aptly describe the living conditions of precarians in general.

One of the examples of this 'fragile existence' is the project work for the third sector which serves to maintain a professional status of culture organiser. Alicja, a 29 years old culture animator, says:

Alicja: 'Yeah so this total, total sense of a seasaw, and in general I am really furious about it, that this kind of a system, that things are so poor, this low level of trust in non-governmental organisations, and at the same time we are doing whatever we can, and somehow I do not wonder whether I should be doing it or not, I have no sort of protection, sometimes I am not insured, and in a week I can write four proposals, for which nobody would pay me, of course, but I know that this is my step towards somehow maintaining myself'.

Alicja is involved in doing a project-based work. She has recently moved to a small village where she came to do local projects with NGOs. She points to the chronic lack of stability in terms of social protections, pay, and insurance in her current type of work. She seems to be frustrated with these working conditions: all the projects are time-limited and not all of them guarantee employment. On the other hand, it

seems that she perceives this kind of a job as the only way to pursue her goals. Alicja's profession does not match her degree in environmental protection. It is clear that she is deeply involved in the projects she is doing and in her cooperation with NGOs. All the decisions related to professional and private life are interdependent, with her professional (project-based) aspirations triggering certain choices (such as the place where she lives).

Transition Into Adulthood (Family and Work)

The respondents are in their early adulthood. It is a key period in their biographies which to a significant degree influences their further development. Not only it is the time of major changes and decision-making, but also a period of coping with new social roles and construction of identities. This phase is both intense and vital for subsequent developments. With current developments on the labour market, this stage certainly requires further research.

Transition into adulthood acquires even more importance when analysed as a key period of the biography, a breakthrough in the process of acquiring position and educational and professional advancement. It is also vital due to the the difficulties that the youth is facing because of social transformations in the contemporary world (Rek-Woźniak 2016). It is at this stage that a transformation in the pecking order of social roles occurs, including those roles that are deeply ingrained in gender identity (Rek-Woźniak 2016). Gender and work acquire a particular significance in this phase of biography. At the intersection of those two, key choices and decisions contributing to the development of life strategies are made. These changes come about mainly in the following spheres: self-reliance, work, family, parenthood and place in life (Wysocka 2013). Thus, they pertain mainly to the spheres of work and family life, and fulfillment of roles related to those two spheres. Marian Niezgoda (2014: 29) adds another important dimension of change in this phase of biography, social and political action. As pointed out by Ewa Wysocka (2013), the emerging adulthood is strictly connected with identity crisis in the area of general attitudes of individuals towards themselves and their surrounding world. By the same token, this period is interesting for the researcher, since it is there that the narrative about individual and social identities is constructed.

Sociologists explain and describe the basis for those processes e.g. in terms of the syndrome of delayed transition into adulthood (Slany 2006). As pointed out by

Krystyna Slany (2006: 15), more than ever before, in the conditions of new capitalism there is an unprecedented salience of relationships between the market, the state and the family, between social inequalities, unemployment, procreation and precisely prolonged stay in the key phase of transition into adulthood. In the words of this scholar: 'the syndrome generates a new and mass phenomenon, that is the delayed transition into social adulthood, defined by taking up a job and acquiring family-matrimonial stability' (Slany 2006: 17, trans. WF). The key element, for those working in precarious conditions, might be the lack of the above-mentioned stability, which, after all, is one of the crucial aspects of transitioning into adulthood. Once the instability expands into other spheres of life and becomes a constant in the existence at the emerging adulthood stage, then the liminal phase is being significantly extended, blocking thus the transition to the next phase of life.

As both transitional and crisis point in the biography, early adulthood accentuates stark inequalities in the positions of men and women on the labour market. These inequalities are mainly grounded in traditional division of gender roles rooted in culture and the institutional attitudes to child custody (Rek-Woźniak 2016). Young men and women have different starting points on the labour market. This is strictly connected with their involvement in family life. All this may have an impact over their experience and its evaluation. There are two questions related to this discussion. Firstly, is there a real difference in perception and description of biographical experiences related to the precarious labour market between men and women? Secondly, how do they define their identity at the intersection of gender, work and family spheres?

The interviews demonstrate with particular clarity the question of moving and settling down, which is strictly connected with autonomy and independence. Patryk, a 24 years old manufacturing worker, and Dawid, a 24 years old men who works at a restaurant without a contract, explain in their narratives that reaching a full independence means moving out of family home:

Patryk: 'Well, I am pleased that I live with my family, because it is clear that you have to be on the same boat with your family, but I am slowly, slowly thinking about renting a flat, about moving out somewhere'.

Dawid: 'We are sharing the same home [with parents]. Though I would prefer to move out and rent something myself, but, gosh, if I were to move out and rent something myself I would have to go and find a [legal] job.'

Patryk lives in a small town close to the Polish-Czech border and works at a Czech factory that manufactures car parts. He mentions moving out from his parent's flat and moving away from the town as a project for his future. He sees the

need to abandon the 'family nest'. The decision to rent a flat is for him a decision that requires time. His work allows him to cover current expenses, but does not allow him to become fully independent. Dawid works in the informal economy. He lives in a middle-sized town and has experienced migration to the United Kingdom for a period. He also lives with his parents. He explains the difficulties he has with moving out. Instability and lack of regular means to cover his expenses which, despite his willingness, prevent him from renting his own flat and unable him to move out of his family home.

When it comes to the plans for the future, our interviewees display problems with transitioning into identity of adulthood. The interviewees not only demonstrate expectations and dreams about the future, but also show anxiety for things that are hard or impossible to achieve in the biographical moment they are in at the time of the interview. Marianna, a 25 years old unemployed woman, dreams about her future:

Marianna: 'My little daughter is a very good pupil, but she doesn't have to be ideal… We are a happy family, we have a loving and supporting marriage and we live in a nice, but above all bigger flat. With stable job, ideally on an employment contract (laughter) I am [working] somewhere behind a desk at the tax office'.

Julita, a 22 years old shopkeeper at a grocery, has a somewhat different vision for her professional and private life:

Julita: 'One day I would like to create something myself… so that my mom does not have to toil at theirs' [current employers, owners of the grocery store]… I would like to have two kids more. That's for sure. And I'd like, I don't know, I think I will get there, I'd like to own my own shop. I don't know, maybe [a shop] with clothing or shoes. But I'd like to have something that is mine so that if I'd work and despite failing ten times I'd try it for eleventh time. And I'd try it for my self.'

The plans for the future of young mothers, Marianna and Julita, show where they want to strive and what they yearn for. At the same time, they demonstrate problems characteristic for their current situation and show the way to solve them. Julita is currently on the maternity leave. She is struggling with barriers and limitations of living in a small town. She says that she is willing to try and set up her own business: a clothes or shoe shop. She stresses that she wants to help out her mother, both are working for a local grocery, so that the latter has an opportunity for an alternative job, at Julita's shop. The idea of setting up her own business is is contrasted with her current situation: Julita, her mother, and her sister are 'condemned' to work for

unfriendly and unkind employers[2]. Both women say they want more stability at work which would, in turn, allow them to dedicate more resources to their families. Both spheres belong to adulthood and are inextricably bound and mutually dependent. The stability at work is a condition for the stability in the family sphere. Achieving both, in turn, is connected with getting a full-time office job or owning a small shop. They are both being blocked by the precarious conditions in small and middle-sized towns, where young mothers are often unable to return to their previous jobs. They find it difficult to get hold of and retain the job, as well as acquire skills and financial resources that are indispensable to start new activities in the field of professional development.

Alienation of Labour

A work does not always equal empowerment and self-actualisation. It may become alienated and transform itself into a process whose fruits are alien to the worker, are detached from him or her and are commodified by the capitalist system. The alienation of work process is about treating work as a commodity. Work becomes detached from the worker and, in a way, enslaves him or her. The process of alienation is inextricably bound to the relations of production. 'The fruits of a man's labour are alienated in relation to him, i.e. they become an alien force that dominates over its creator' (Schaff 1999: 32, trans. WF). Marx puts special emphasis on alienation and deprivation, 'this vast objectivised power to whom even the social labour counterposed itself as one of its moments, this power does not belong to the worker, but to the personified conditions of production, to the Capital' (Schaff 1999: 33, trans. WF) Therefore we can talk about alienation not when a man is alienated, but when his creations are alienated from him (Schaff 1999: 53). This is an objective rather than a subjective relation. When they are alienated, workers do not perceive their actions as their own (Israel 1971: 43).

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[2] Very often the youth perceives self-employment as an alternative to this kind of work. The benefits of self-employment: '(1) a hope for higher remuneration and improvement of the economic position, (2) the eagerness to become autonomous and (3) a 'leap into the future' syndrome (self-employment is perceived here as an individual and purely 'private' coping strategy on the labour market where one 'invents' their workplace since one has been sacked from the previous one and there is a more or less justified anxiety over losing one's workplace' (Drozdowski and Matczak 2004: 92, trans. WF).

The conditions of alienation extend to all the aspects of human life. Thus, a question arises: to what extend do the individuals feel themselves alienated? When describing the class society, Marx talks about dehumanised human beings. Alienation means depriving one of an opportunity to be creative and participate in the society (Krasowska 2015: 191). Thus, subjectivity and agency are limited. For people who are transitioning into adulthood, work is one of the most important arenas of great choices, breakthroughs and transformations. Thus, the alienation of work among the youth, on top of the so-called delayed adulthood syndrome and crisis of identification, may be transformed into an acute problem of identity. Young workers who suffer from alienation of labour and precariousness may feel 'blocked', with no agency over their fate. If, as Wysocka (2013: 74) claims, the inherent feature of emerging adulthood in the world of permanent insecurity on the labour market is the suspension of decisions about self-creation, then where can one find agency? In this aspect problems pertain to decent treatment at work, and can be seen in Julita's narrative:

Julita: 'They wouldn't listen to me, I was too young for them… The very fact that she [the boss] can insult the employer… the employee in presence of others. So, for example, when I was selling cold cuts, well, she would approach me, on Friday, when more people than at any other time do their shopping, she would approach me, insult me and leave. As if she felt happy that she has this power over people… right now I am on maternity leave, then I plan to take leave to raise a child, because I have no one to take care of my daughter. And… there are no nurseries or anything like that.'

When she talks about the difficulties of reconciling her work and family obligations, Julita stresses the extent to which the process of creating a coherent identity of an adult woman is distorted in both areas. At work Julita is not treated in a way she wants to be. The bosses disregard her, do not listen to her, or even insult her and abuse their power over her as an employee. She is deprived of control over the situation. She is being blocked from any attempt at changing her situation by the conditions of her small town which does not support mothers in the reconciliation of their professional and family roles. Julita is against her poor working conditions. However, she is 'trapped' by them because of the lack of alternative and the necessity to earn money. Her helplessness underlines the gradual loss of control over her position at work due to the need to adapt to the conditions created by the employers. Why, then, do we call those phenomena 'alienation' rather than processes inherent to the nature of capitalism itself? Because this is 'a social process whereby products of human activity operate within a given social mechanism in a way that is not intended by the man, becoming thus transformed into an independent force which prevents

the man from realising his goals and by doing so dominates over the man' (Schaff 1999: 57, trans. WF). Therefore, the alienation becomes a phenomenon with its own, unintended dynamics.

The inability to plan career and professional life also alienates Adam, a 25 years old culture worker. Despite his insecure situation on the labour market, he tries to plan:

Adam: 'In fact, here comes the point of the story in which I am precisely now, right now. So I don't have any specific plans what to do after December two thousand and sixteen. I don't know precisely what will I do, where, what, what will I do, my contract of mandate terminates precisely in December two thousand and sixteen, after that I haven't got any specific plans. I am thinking now about returning to doctoral studies, but even if I managed to get hold of a scholarship, I don't know if that would suffice to sustain my current standard of live.'

The working experience of Adam, who has worked many times on contracts of mandate or contracts for specific work and is currently living of a project (also paid on the basis of a temporary contract), unable him to 'concretise' his plans. He is so uncertain that he even does not know what he will do after the termination of the current contract. He does not talk about laying down professional roots in terms of an ultimate goal. He is merely 'drifting' on the surface of the profession loosely related to his degree. He is connected with the milieu of artists and holds a degree in this field. He is mentioning his vague plans to move back to his doctoral studies. This expresses the search for a way to stay on the surface that is concentrated on sustaining the current standard of life, rather than on the realisation of professional ambitions.

Małgorzata's narrative is another example of alienation. She is a 32 years old unemployed woman, currently involved in setting up a cooperative in the food sector. She says that wage labour in general deprives her of the possibility to construct her own identity. Her work is alienating since it puts her in the cogs of the machine, usually that of a multinational corporation, which hinders her from satisfying her own needs:

Małgorzata: 'At the same time what brought me here was, to change things, since that wage labour was so depressing for me, so as to create a workplace for myself, that is, to create a social cooperative with my friends. Although its theme is not close to me, since this is a brewery, a craft one, and I am not too fond of beer, but I like the people that I am supposed to do this with, that I am doing it with. Besides, I want it be a social cooperative and this form [of a company – translator's note] interests me.'

In order to stop the process of alienation, she tries to set up a craft brewery which, at the time of the interview, is about to be launched on the market. What counts for Małgorzata is the community of people that create the cooperative. And it is she who holds the creative and participatory role in it.

Conclusions

The biographical experience of work by the youth is manifested in various aspects of participation on the labour market. The studies about the youth show problems that distort the process of combining the initiation into the role of an adult person and that of a worker. Those problems, as explained by the researchers, are mainly rooted in the inadequacy and unsuitability of the educational system to the needs of the labour market (Niezgoda 2014). It turns out that the experience of work by young adults is inextricably bound with biographical processes and other, unrelated to work, social roles fulfilled by young adults. The everyday experience of work shows that work is rooted in the social system that is characterised by the fragility of social roles that are played within it. These roles are unstable. The identity, in turn, is shaken by multiple contradictions rooted in the lability of labour market. The professional life is being conducted on the margins. It is accompanied by a permanent yearning to achieve and sustain employment. This hinders the realization of long-term plans or relegates them into a vaguely-defined future. As a result, projecting the future based on work and professional identity is virtually impossible. Instead, projections are focused around adulthood as a category that, at its many levels, builds the sense of belongingness to the society. Projects for the future, in turn, shape the relationships between the market, the state and the family. Those relationships suggests dimensions in which the process of achieving social status is blocked. The transition to next phases of life is blocked or delayed, which produces a state of 'suspended living'. This state, in turn, severely affects the process of identity building. These processes are related to precarisation of work, the latter being a phenomenon that determines social relationships. This sheds a new light on everyday patterns of conversations shown by the interviewees, who somehow muddle through the reality in order to reach the goals they have set for themselves. However, these goals are unattainable for them. The interviewees are blocked because patterns of their actions are conditioned by the precariousness.

Biographical studies on the experience of precarious work uncover the mechanisms of understanding actions that are focused on experiencing the world as it is, here and now. Work becomes a phenomenon that is based upon processes of alienation. In the final analysis, those processes hinder the individual from overcoming the commodification which, in turn, is strictly connected with precariousness. Questions about the relationship between experiencing of work and biographies of the youth provoke reflections about processes of adaptation to the social reality or strategies to cope with it (Niezgoda 2014: 29). With young, precarious workers we are focusing on the reconstruction of strategies for coping with social reality and labour market. This premise directs our analysis in the first place to the pursuit of the consequences of the impact that processes of precarisation exert on the experience of work. Those consequences can be traced, among others, to the themes we have suggested: problems with identity building, alienation of work and problems with transitioning into adulthood. The experience of work by the precarians is both a daily and a biographical struggle against those problems. The attempts to uncover the relationship between the creation of biographical narratives and the experiences of work can shed light on new dimensions of both academic and public debate about the transformations on the labour market and their impact on the identity of young adults.

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