

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 14 - Precarious workers in Poland and Germany

Speakers: Dr Vera Trappmann and Alexandra Seehaus

Vera: Hello, and welcome to today's Leeds University Business School's Research and Innovation Podcast. I'm Vera Trappmann.

Alexandra: And I'm Alexandra Seehaus.

Vera: Today we're going to be talking about a research project that we've been working on for the last four years on young precarious workers in two European countries, in Germany and Poland. And maybe a good start would be to kick off with what do we understand by precarity?

Alexandra: So, you could think about precarious workers as those people who take on a job role, that have a permanent need, but at the same time they are not given the same rights as those in permanent employment. So, basically there are various dimensions to precarious employment. On the one side, you could think about it as just those people on short-term or zero hour contracts who have low pay, but it could also be people who earn above the minimum wage, but maybe they just receive their income quite infrequently.

And you could also consider those workers to be precarious who maybe don't have access to social security or lack employment rights like representation of collective interests. One good example may be delivery riders that deliver your pizza or your Chinese takeaway, or you could also think about cleaners in a business complex, or people who stock the shelves in supermarkets.

Vera: Yes, and the interesting thing, to me, was that it was... that precarity not only affected people with lower education, but that precarious working conditions occurred across all sectors, really, and affected people with different... really all levels of education. So, for example, we had a woman who had two Masters degrees, who had lots of international experience, and still at the age of 31 she had only contracts, short-term contracts for one or three months, even employed by a public employer.

So, in a way I think we learned from our research that precarious work seems to be almost omnipresent, and this is reflected in the data that we have gathered. Alex, maybe can you tell a little bit more about the concrete labour market situations? How did it look for young people in Germany and Poland?

Alexandra: Yes, sure. So, the thing is that the situation, if you look at the numbers and the statistics, it's really quite depressing, to be honest. So, there are quite a high number of young people who live below the poverty line in Germany and in Poland. In fact, it's a quarter of those between 18 and 24 who live below the poverty line, and also there is quite a high percentage of young people who are in temporary work and more than half of Germans under 24 years only ever had a short-term work contract.

So, that's quite a high number, it's even 30% for those under 35 years. And additionally to that, you already mentioned education, considering that Germany is a highly coordinated market economy, it's quite shocking that even a country like that, we have about 10% of people who are neither in work nor in training. We call those people NEETs, so neither education nor in training. Yes, so that's quite a depressing situation altogether.

Vera: Yes, I totally agree. I personally also just learned on this project that we have, like, 6% of young people leave school without any qualifications. So, that is almost a kind of risk of a lifetime precarious career. But Alex, I wonder, is this objective precarious situation reflected in young people's perceptions about their lives? Do they see themselves as precarious, or what do they think about themselves and their lives?

Alexandra: So, if we don't look at the numbers and statistics, but we actually ask young people, and that's what we did in the interviews that we did in the interviews with young people in Germany and Poland, the situation looks very, very much different to the objective statistic data. So, people were quite ambivalent, to be honest, so many of them were quite stressed and quite a few of them were also suffering under the constant uncertainty of their precarious employment. Also because of the low income and the impossibility to make long term plans. But at the same time, they also had a lot of positive feelings, and they were very much focussed on the positive sides of their employment. So, they very often saw their jobs as a chance for personal development, or they just enjoyed the autonomy and flexibility that the jobs

gave them, although they had difficulty planning their future, or even make ends meet.

So, what we found was that many of the young people that we interviewed were actually quite creative and able in finding ways to deal with the negative aspects of precarious employment. Some of them were obviously supported by their parents, some of them had support from their partners. A lot of them really quickly just learned to optimise their performance in the workplace, or they simply just started to very much structure their life around the demands the work and employment situation imposed on them.

So, it's really not that people thought about themselves as precarious. In many cases, in the interviews, we found that the young people thought about the flexible or precarious situation as something that is temporary, that they would simply just overcome as they continued working in the workplace or as they, maybe established themselves within their occupation. So, many of them also saw, if they just put some extra effort into their work then they could, kind of, just individually improve their situation and then they wouldn't be precarious after a few years anymore.

Also, we had some cases, very much depended on the level of education that young people had, so I guess those who were more educated, they were a bit more hopeful that they would be able to overcome their precarious employment situations. Others, often those less educated or from less privileged social backgrounds, they maybe just started to accept the uncertainty and precarious employment was simply just a part of their life. So, they just learned to deal with it or... at the same time we had people who saw the negative aspects of precarity, just as a trade-off. So, to summarise, in most of the cases young people definitely did not perceive themselves as precarious.

Vera:

Yes, maybe it's worthwhile mentioning that we have developed this further into a typology, where we try to classify, to group the experiences of people, to come up with types that would help, also, other researchers to use this when they deal with precarious work in other countries, for example, or with other age groups that will help compare more of precarious employment across other cases.

And in this typology we show that some keep up work orientation, that more or less strive for the all pastimes, with a permanent, good paid job. And everything on the way, in

between this, is just temporal, while other reject a kind of Fordist, stable employment relation and try to embrace the freedom of insecurity and the freedom that comes with flexibility. While we also saw a minority that withdraws completely from the labour market, whether while they see themselves preoccupied with other problems or other things in their lives, or because they try to escape from precarity, and the best solution seemed to be just to leave paid employment right behind them.

And this escape away from precarity into something else, so into a commune or labour migration, I think that that brings us to an important part, understanding why there is so little resistance against precarity. So, that was really just a minority, and they were not actively protesting against labour market conditions, but they were rather, kind of, exiting the situation. So, something... they didn't like it and they were not protesting against it, not fighting against it, but were, kind of, yes, just resigning, really, from the labour market. And Alex, we have thought a lot about why is that the case, maybe you can tell us more about the entire complex of protest.

Alexandra:

Yes. So, I guess overall there is quite a lot of reason to be sceptical that the young generation, or at least young people in Poland and Germany, are going to protest a lot against the continuing precarisation of the work and employment situation, and you already mentioned some of the reasons. One thing, certainly, and that very much just depends on the life phase in which they are in, is that they are just really preoccupied with so many things in their life, because they are just transitioning into adulthood, just trying to find out what they want to do with the rest of their lives. Many of them have a lot of other issues they need to deal with.

So, one main and really simple reason is just that they are very preoccupied with other things, and they don't necessarily focus on the criticism of the work and employment situations, and they are also not very much familiar with unions, at least in most of the sectors they work in. Maybe one other reason, that could be considered to be something positive, but in this moment it isn't really, is that what we find in the interviews, that many of our interviewees had quite strong post-materialist values, which in itself I really think you could consider something good, but it didn't necessarily help to, kind of, build a foundation for some criticism of inequality.

So, they would look at the workplace, and they would simply rather think that they don't need that much money, and they don't need this kind of lifestyle that their parents had, and this would rather prevent themselves from being critical and doing something against the situation. So, in this sense, post-materialist values weren't really helpful. Another thing that you already mentioned, Vera, is that most workers, even if they were critical of their current work and employment situation, and if they were actually suffering from it, they would rather choose individual strategies to deal or cope with it. So, they wouldn't really see precarious employment as something that is shaped by economic pressures, or by political decisions, but they would simply see it as a situation that is down to the life phase in which they are in, or something that depends on their own performance, or their own employability. So, that wouldn't necessarily promote any political collective strategies to deal with the precarious situations.

However, there is a little bit of hope, what we also saw was definitely that the normalisation of precarity that we saw in the interviews, although it is very strong in Poland and in Germany, it does have certain limits, like biographical, social and political limits. So, we also found, besides all the things that sounded a bit depressing now, we did find some forms of micro-resistance and contestation, we noticed a lot of criticism of the lack of meritocracy in society, we also found criticism of the alienation of a lot of jobs people were working in. So, in many cases people chose precarious jobs, but only because they didn't want to work in, like, company... private market jobs which they considered to be quite alienated. So, in that sense there is a lot of criticism of how work and employment is looking like at the moment. And in both countries we did find some criticism of the development, and we did find some people who actually engaged in political action or in union work.

Maybe one thing that needs to be mentioned, though, is that those people who then ended up being mobilised and tried to collectively do something against the precarisation of the work and employment situation, they showed quite specific characteristics, so it would be... it wouldn't be everybody who could be mobilised, but we mainly found that it is, again, those people who have higher educational degrees. And often it was also those people with a quite strong occupational identity who also decided that it was worthwhile and that they actually had the

resources to engage in collective action, to try to collectively improve their situation.

Vera: Yes. And interestingly, and maybe funnily as well, there was one peculiar finding that all those that engaged in protest had a very conflictual relationship to their parents.

Alexandra: Yes, that is true as well, yes. That was another of the biographic aspects that promote or seem to hamper criticism of the work and employment situations. I feel like we haven't talked much about the differences between Germany and Poland. Maybe we should say some more about that.

Vera: Yes. Interestingly, the situation has been surprisingly similar. Despite different economic institutions, despite different employment relation systems, so the kind of context conditions, are very different in these two countries. But nevertheless, the way that young people experienced, framed and dealt with precarity was pretty similar. And maybe the only difference, really has been that there was slightly more protest in Poland than in Germany and trying to understand this we found that there is a higher incongruity of statutes in Poland than in Germany.

So, that means that someone with a high education and with many qualifications does not necessarily result in high income. So, there is a kind of disbalance between how much you invested in your education and how is your actual labour market position. So, probably people felt more like, if... yes, so they felt like I have put so much into my education, but I don't earn enough, so that there is a strange thing, and that has brought them more to the streets. So, there were more people in Poland, there have been public demonstrations, and there was more, kind of, sense that this is not right and not just.

Alexandra: So, I feel like we mentioned quite a lot of the findings that we had in our project, if we summarise the main insights, Vera, what would you say? What are the most important things?

Vera: That's difficult, on the one hand because these four years have brought up so many different avenues and interesting results. Probably I would say that precarity in young age is experienced differently than in older age, and that it's getting normalised. So, it sees rather little resistance, and it's not perceived as a result of the structure of the labour market, but as a result of individual behaviour. So, it is perceived as something transitional, that you

can overcome by your individual efforts, and if you are stuck in precarity then the rationale for this is individual failure. So there, what we really see is a huge individualisation of a structural situation of the labour market, and that puts a lot of pressure on young people.

And we still have to investigate further how mental health problems are related to this individualisation, and how effective resources, how a kind of emotional support network helps to cope with this type of precarity. And we are currently writing a paper that just deals with the role of emotions and affects and what impact this has on the experience of precarity. So, there are much more results coming out of this project, but I think, for now, we have to accept that young workers are far off from mobilising political discontent or any protest related to their precarious working conditions, just in very few exceptions, but that they are mostly burdening themselves with adapting to the new regime of precarious labour.

Alexandra: Yes, many more topics we could talk about and go into detail. But yes, so thanks for listening to this episode.

Vera: Yes, and if you are interested in more results, or ongoing research that we do on precarity, just please get in touch with us. Thanks a lot.