

Precarious Employment, Precarious Life? A Qualitative Study Exploring the Perspective of Households.

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Extended abstract

Introduction

Many researchers agree that precarious employment should be defined as a multidimensional concept, encompassing different dimensions, potentially making workers insecure or vulnerable (Julià et al. 2017). In my approach, precarious employment comprises seven dimensions: (1) employment instability, (2) low material rewards, (3) erosion of workers' rights and social protection, (4) de-standardised working time arrangements, (5) limited training and employability opportunities, (6) lack of possibilities for employee representation and (7) imbalanced interpersonal power relations (Bosmans 2016). Precarious employment has been on the rise for some decades in Western labour markets (Benach et al. 2014). Previous research demonstrated the negative consequences of precarious employment for the health and well-being of employees (Benach et al. 2014; Bosmans 2016). However, the broader social consequences of precarious employment, for example on (family) transitions, and family and social life, are under-examined. Moreover, most studies only consider the perspective of the 'precarious' worker, while the perspective and experiences of other household members are neglected. Therefore, this study focuses on the broader social experience of precarious employment at the household level, taking into account the perspectives of different household members. More specifically, I want to investigate how households understand the relationship between precarious employment and its impact on the life course (e.g. life planning, family transitions), family and social life of household members.

From a multidimensional perspective on precarious employment, each job can bear some features of employment precariousness. However, many features of precarious employment coincide in some typical – although context-dependent – employment arrangements. In this study, I will focus on temporary agency work in Belgium. Temporary agency work tends to be related to high job insecurity (Hall 2006; Silla et al. 2005), low wages and few benefits (Elcioglu 2010; Kojima 2015), unpredictable or irregular schedules (Aletraris 2010; Håkansson et al. 2013), poor training opportunities (Håkansson et al. 2013; Knox 2010) and higher chances of unfavourable social relations at work (Gundert & Hohendanner 2014; Winkler & Mahmood 2015). Moreover, the triadic employment relationship involves a higher vulnerability to issues such as withholding mandatory rights, excessive or conflicting demands and problematic health and safety protection (Aletraris 2010; Underhill & Quinlan 2011). While temporary agency work is often characterised by several of the employment precariousness dimensions, its consequences for the individual worker and his/her household, family and social life heavily depend of the household configuration and the employment situation of other household members (Laß 2017). Therefore, in this study, I focus on the experiences of persons living in a variety of household compositions (living alone, living with parents, living with a family, etc.). From the literature, we know that for example lone parents, and especially single mothers, are vulnerable for the social consequences of precarious employment (OECD 2015). Moreover, I will focus on a variety in employment constellations at the household

level. The effect of an individual's employment situation has to be seen for example in the interplay with the other partner's employment situation as couples usually take both partners' employment into account when it comes to household decisions (Laß 2017). The experiences of precarious workers whose partner has a full-time permanent contract, can be very different from those whose partner is for example unemployed (Laß 2017).

Temporary agency work in Belgium

In 2017, in Belgium, daily on average 2.95% of the total workforce was employed by temporary work agencies (Federgon 2018). 656.281 persons were employed as a temporary agency worker in Belgium during 2017. This only compels a small proportion of the labour force, but the share of temporary agency work is on the increase, and among the highest in Europe (Arrowsmith 2006; Federgon 2018).

In Belgium, the temporary agency sector is strongly regulated (ABVV interim 2016; Bosmans 2016). Only licensed agencies are permitted to operate on the labour market. Moreover, temporary agency work is allowed only in a limited number of situations. Contracts are of limited duration in all cases (usually daily, weekly or monthly). In addition, temporary agency workers are entitled to the same wage, benefits and social protection than permanent workers performing the same job in the client company. However, there is evidence that employers tend to work around these regulations (ABVV interim 2016; Bosmans 2016). Temporary agency workers additionally qualify for rights closely associated to family/social life such as maternity/paternity leave, parental leave and brief leave of absence (leave permitted due to circumstances such as a sick child). However, parental leave for example is only allowed after a certain period of seniority, excluding temporary agency workers from this right in almost all cases (ABVV interim 2016; Bosmans 2016).

Methodology

Sample and recruitment

The study population includes temporary agency workers living in Flanders and their households. The household could include the temporary agency worker and other household members such as his/her partner, parents, children of at least 12 years old, friends, etc. living in the same house. The researcher always asked the temporary agency worker whether it was possible to include other household members in the interview. When this was not possible or not preferred, only the temporary agency worker was interviewed. Moreover, I searched for a variety in kinds of household compositions (living alone, living with parents, cohousing with friends, living with a family, etc.). From the literature, we know that for example lone parents, and especially single mothers, are vulnerable for the social consequences of precarious employment (OECD 2015). Moreover, I searched for a variety in employment constellations at the household level. The experiences of precarious workers whose partner has a full-time permanent contract accompanied by many social benefits, can be very different from those whose partner is for example unemployed (Laß 2017). Other criteria, namely socio-demographic characteristics (sex, age, educational level, occupational class) and voluntariness, were considered to ensure diversity in the sample.

The participants were selected with the help of the Christian (ACV) and Socialist (ABVV) trade unions. Advertisements about the study were distributed on social media and on their websites. In addition, personal e-mails were sent to temporary agency workers who were trade union members. Potential participants were asked to complete their contact details in an online form of which the content could only be retrieved by the researcher, or to contact the researcher by phone or e-mail. So far, 9 temporary agency workers (and their households) were recruited for an interview. Further interviews are planned in the coming months.

Procedures and data analysis

I interviewed the households about their experiences related to precarious employment and the ways this is interrelated with and affects their life course, family and social life. Special attention was paid to the feelings of and the meanings given by the interviewees, following a phenomenological perspective (Creswell 2007; Patton 2002; Russell & Ryan 2010). The interview topics were based on existing research on precarious employment (containing the following topics: employment instability, low material rewards, erosion of workers' rights and social protection, de-standardised working time arrangements, limited training and employability opportunities, lack of possibilities for employee representation and imbalanced interpersonal power relations (Bosmans 2016; Julià et al. 2017)), the life course, family and social life. However, given the scarcity of qualitative data on this topic, I partly followed an inductive approach to allow research findings to emerge from the raw data (Boyatzis 1998; Patton 2002). The in-depth interviews were semi-structured. The interviews took place at the place that was most practical for the interviewee(s) (e.g. interviewees' home, university buildings).

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded with Nvivo™ software. First, the interviews were read through. Second, significant statements were detected and any patterns observed were sorted into codes (Boyatzis 1998; Patton 2002). Codes were either developed deductively from past theory or inductively from the data. Afterwards codes were reviewed to develop an organised set of codes (Boyatzis 1998; Patton 2002). The analysis was iterative, allowing the coding tree to evolve throughout the data collection and analysing process. After the codes were identified, the researcher focused on the integrity of the codes and searched for links between codes (Boyatzis 1998; Patton 2002). While analysing the data, the feelings of the participants and the meanings given to experiences got much attention, in line with the phenomenological approach (Creswell 2007). To end, the results will be integrated into an in-depth description of the phenomenon (Creswell 2007). In reporting the results, pseudonyms will be used to protect participants' identity.

Results

So far, 9 individual or household interviews are analysed. Further interviews will be planned and analysed in the coming months. The results will be presented at EPC2020.

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