

# Biographical Work as a Mechanism of Dealing with Precarity and Precariousness

**Jacek Burski**   
University of Wrocław, Poland

**Adam Mrozowicki**   
University of Wrocław, Poland

**Aleksandra Drabina-Różewicz**   
University of Wrocław, Poland

**Agata Krasowska**   
University of Wrocław, Poland

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**Abstract:** The article aims to explore the relationship between biographical work and the strategies of managing precarity (low-paid and unstable employment) and precariousness (insecurity and instability of life conditions in general) in Poland's new capitalism. Poland witnessed the rise of precarity during the entire capitalist transformation after 1989, while the expansion of precarious, temporary, and non-standard employment accelerated in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The main theoretical framework of the article is based on concepts deriving from biographical sociology and was elaborated during a joint workshop with German biographical researcher, Fritz Schütze, within the PREWORK project. The case of a young female shop assistant, Helena, with a difficult family and work background was selected from a larger sample of 63 biographical narrative interviews with precarious young workers in Poland. Based on the case study and the broader context of the research project, it is argued that biographical work may have the potential for questioning and challenging precarity; yet, without necessary biographical and social resources, such a process is hard to be completed. As a result, the paper questions the macrosocial vision of "precariat" as the "class in-the-making" and instead offers a detailed account of the microsocial ways of dealing with precarity by a representative of the most disadvantaged group of precarious young workers.

**Jacek Burski** is a sociologist and an assistant professor at the Institute of Sociology of the University of Wrocław. He has a post-doc in the NCN COV-WORK project on the consequences of the socio-economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. His academic interests cover the sociology of work, the sociology of biography, precarity, and social change.

**email address:** [jacek.burski@uwr.edu.pl](mailto:jacek.burski@uwr.edu.pl)

**Adam Mrozowicki** is a sociologist and an associate professor at the Institute of Sociology, University of Wrocław, Poland. The leader of the UWr team in the NCN-DFG PREWORK project on precarious young workers in Poland and Germany and the leader of the NCN COV-WORK project on the consequences of the socio-economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. His academic interests lie in the sociology of work, economic sociology, comparative employment relations, precarity, critical social realism, and biographical methods.

**email address:** [adam.mrozowicki@uwr.edu.pl](mailto:adam.mrozowicki@uwr.edu.pl)

**Aleksandra Drabina-Różewicz** has a Ph.D. in social sciences in the field of sociology. The author of publications and the editor of monographs on masculinity, femininity, work, and pop culture. A researcher in national and international projects: NCN PREWORK “Young Precarious Workers

in Poland and Germany: A Comparative Sociological Study on Working and Living Conditions, Social Consciousness, and Civic Engagement” (2016-2020); NCN “Social Structure, Networks, and Consumption Tastes and Practices” (2018-2021); NCN COV-WORK “Socio-Economic Consciousness, Work Experiences, and Coping Strategies of Poles in the Context of the Post-Pandemic Crisis” (2021-2025). Her research interests focus on qualitative research (biographical method, visual analysis of pop culture).

**email address:** [aleksandra.drabina@uwr.edu.pl](mailto:aleksandra.drabina@uwr.edu.pl)

**Agata Krasowska** has a Ph.D. in sociology and is an assistant professor at the Department of Sociology of Work and Economy at the Institute of Sociology of the University of Wrocław. Her main research interests lie in the sociology of change, the sociology of knowledge and culture, and the sociology of work. She examines the issues of precariousness, work experience, and coping strategies of employees in a (post)pandemic crisis. She also deals with the methodology of qualitative research, with particular emphasis on the biographical method and autoethnography. She is currently working on a grant and a monograph on experiencing mental crises by precarious workers.

**email address:** [agata.krasowska@uwr.edu.pl](mailto:agata.krasowska@uwr.edu.pl)

**The** main aim of the article is to present the relationship between strategies of managing precarity and precariousness and biographical work done by an individual in a difficult family and work situation. Precariousness refers to a universal human condition of dependency on other people and socio-economic circumstances that protect us against vulnerability deriving from our finitude and mortality (Butler 2009:14-15). It is not reducible to paid employment and reflects our vulnerability of being hurt or even dying if not defended

by supportive social conditions, including, among others, supportive social relations and welfare institutions. Precarity, in turn, can be understood in terms of “work for remuneration characterized by uncertainty, low income, and limited social benefits and statutory entitlements” (Vosko 2010:2). Finally, biographical work is defined as interpretative practices “carried out in the service of an actor’s biography, including its review, maintenance, repair, and alteration” (Strauss 1993:98).

This article aims at contributing to the debates on the relevance of workers’ agency, as well as biograph-

ically and structurally defined resources for managing precarity (Haratyk, Biały, and Gońda 2017; Manolchev, Saundry, and Lewis 2018; Petriglieri, Ashford, and Wrzesniewski 2019; Waniek 2019). Earlier studies (Manolchev et al. 2018; Mrozowicki and Trappmann 2020) suggested that the effects of precarity may be mitigated if an individual possesses and can mobilize biographical and social resources that protect them against general precariousness. However, less explored are the ways of managing precarity in the case of individuals whose biographical and social resources remain very scarce. By addressing that issue, the article focuses on young workers in Poland. Poland is a country where the share of precariously employed continued to grow since the early 2000s, and the welfare state institutions, reformed according to neoliberal principles in the early 1990s, did not provide sufficient protection against the precariousness for the unemployed and those excluded from the labor market (Maciejewska, Mrozowicki, and Piasna 2016). In the mid-2010s, according to the Eurostat Labour Force Survey data, 47% of people aged 20-29 worked with various kinds of temporary contracts, which was one of the highest shares in the EU. Focusing on the experiences of precarious young workers, in the article, we deal with two specific research questions: (1) How do precariousness and precarity interact within an individual biography and contribute to a biographical trajectory of suffering? (2) How does an individual cope with precarious life and work circumstances by doing biographical work, and is it possible to overcome them?

The article is divided into two parts. First, in the theoretical introduction, we explain the distinction between the concepts of precariousness and precarity. We also introduce the concepts of biographical work, trajectory potentials, and the trajectory of suf-

fering as a process structure. Our understanding of the latter is primarily based on the work of the German sociologist Fritz Schütze (2008) and researchers using his strategies of a (sociolinguistically based) analysis of social processes mainly developed based on autobiographical narrative interviews. The empirical base consists of 63 interviews collected within the PREWORK project, focused on the biographical experiences and coping strategies of precarious young workers in Poland. The second part of the paper is focused on the analysis of a biographical narrative interview with Helena—a young woman in a precarious life situation who is burdened with a complex and difficult life history. The article makes use of some of the discussions of the PREWORK team on Helena's case with Fritz Schütze during a workshop held in October 2018 in Wrocław. The interview with Helena had been translated into English. Importantly, it is not a verbatim transcript of the workshop, and the entire responsibility for its shape and the presented findings lies solely with the authors.

The article demonstrates that, even by limiting the analysis to a single narrative, it is possible to point out tensions that are characteristic of the biography of a precarious young female worker—tensions of being torn between different risks located in both family and relationships. It also argues for the importance of biographical work for mastering a trajectory of suffering as it is referred to in biographical research (Schütze 2012), the sources of which can be found both in the narrator's family experience and in her occupational career. Contrary to earlier studies on the "precariat" as the social class "in the making," which is prone to be "externally" mobilized by various political forces (Standing 2011), this analysis is focused on the development of biographical resources as a result of biographical work that can

help an affected individual to cope with precarity and precariousness at the same time.

Before the case study is presented, a brief introduction to the main elements of the PREWORK project theoretical framework will be explained.

## Precariousness, Precarity, and Precarious Employment

In sociology, there is a longstanding discussion on the meanings of concepts denoting uncertain, fragile, vulnerable aspects of human existence and work (Castel 2000; Standing 2011; Arnold and Bongiovi 2012; Pałęcka and Phucienniczak 2017; Polkowska 2018; Dörre 2019). In this article, we refer to the concepts of precariousness and precarity to respectively denote life- and work-related aspects of contemporary insecurity. According to Butler (2009:13), precariousness is a shared condition of human life that is injurable, that is, which can be “lost, destroyed, or systematically neglected to the point of death.” Even though precariousness is universal, the various categories of individuals are unequally exposed to it. Firstly, social and family relationships enabling an individual to reproduce their existence on “an emotional and social level” are an important mechanism of sheltering against precariousness (Castel 2000:520). They provide individuals with various resources, such as helpful networks, as well as material and emotional support, which could be used to minimize the effects of our universal fragility as human beings. Secondly, in the labor market context, the unequal exposure to precariousness is conceptually captured by the concept of precarity. It designates a “politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic support networks and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (But-

ler 2009:25). The modern welfare state (Castel 2000), as well as labor market institutions linking workers’ rights to a standard employment relationship (Doellgast, Lillie, and Pulignano 2018), are aimed at reducing precarity through employment policies, social transfers, and inclusive collective agreements. The selective access to social protection, usually based on employment history, has also been a way of managing the population. For instance, women and ethnic minorities, who often found themselves outside the standard employment relationship due to cultural stereotypes and discrimination, were often pushed to the margins of the labor market and deprived of protection.

The erosion of welfare institutions and standard employment relationships in the wake of neoliberalism has a twofold effect. First, it threatened those in the core segments of the labor market with insecurity and contributed to the expansion of precarious forms of work on the labor market peripheries (Dörre 2019). The term “precarious employment” refers to the forms of work that are “uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker” (Kalleberg 2009:2). Its expansion contributed to the well-known claim by Guy Standing (2011) on the possibility of the emergence of a new social class “in the making,” between the class in itself and the class for itself—the precariat. The latter is said to consist of people who—due to their work situation—lack industrial citizenship rights typical of Fordism, such as employment and income security, or the right to join and establish trade unions, and share a “minimal trust relationship with capital or the state” (Standing 2011:8). Yet, the thesis about the emergence of the precariat was criticized as it was said to be too heterogeneous in terms of its sources of income (Wright 2016) and lacking a coherent socio-political consciousness (Gardawski 2020).

Second, neoliberal ideology appealed to the idea of a self-managed entrepreneurial subject who manages their biography like a company and takes responsibility for protecting oneself against precarity by mobilizing individual resources (Bove, Murgia, and Armano 2017). As documented by biographical case studies (Haratyk et al. 2017), the latter ideology significantly marked the social consciousness and coping practices of working Poles. In the case of young people, the ideologies of entrepreneurship and meritocracy were said to underlie the “normalization” of precarious employment that is seen as an inherent aspect of occupational biographies.

In practice, the forms of precarious employment vary depending on country-specific institutional contexts. In Poland, they range from informal work in the shadow economy, through the various forms of civil law contracts and dependent self-employment that are not covered by the stipulations of the Labor Code, to low-paid full-time and part-time jobs of workers with standard employment contracts. The expansion of precarious work can be linked to the adoption of a low-wage model of the business competition after 1989, the weakening of institutional protections of the employed and the unemployed in the course of successive labor market reforms aimed at counteracting high unemployment, and the weakness of industrial relations of actors and institutions in regulating and monitoring employment conditions. Even though we can observe a trend towards regulating some of the most precarious aspects of the labor market in Poland since the mid-2010s, the number of those working with civil law contracts remains significant (1,2 million in 2019) and decreases very slowly.

## **Biographical Trajectory and Biographical Work**

In the PREWORK project, we paid attention to the consequences of precarization for the life strate-

gies of young people as one of the groups among the most affected by insecurity in contemporary Polish society. In the course of the research, it was observed that labor market precarity is experienced and defined as a biographical problem in particular by those who lack biographical, economic, and social resources and thus are exposed to greater precariousness. In this article, we examine that argument further, focus on the research subjects’ biographical experiences, and discuss, first, how the intersection of precariousness and precarity occur at the level of individual biography, contributing to a growing disorder and lack of control over one’s life. Second, we examine under what conditions and how can an individual affected by precariousness and precarity counteract them. In other words, acknowledging the difficulty (or hopelessness even) of precarious life and work situations, we would also like to explore the processes and practices of biographical resilience to them and conditions for overcoming them. The tools of biographical sociology by Fritz Schütze and, in particular, the concepts of biographical trajectory and biographical work appeared to be well-suited to address such research questions.

The biographical trajectory of suffering is one of the four biographical process structures distinguished in his writings by Schütze to denote the most important organizing principles of an individual life story or a narrators’ orientations towards the most important parts of their life (Schütze 2005:294). In doing sequential and comparative analyses of spontaneous oral narratives (in the context of autobiographical narrative interviews), Schütze discovered four biographical process structures, ways of experiencing one’s life, among them biographical trajectories of suffering and losing control (Schütze 2005:294). In discovering such processes of suf-

fering (by way of analyses of spontaneous autobiographical narratives), he was also sensitized by Glaser and Strauss's research on the "trajectories of dying" (Glaser and Strauss 1968). Schütze's concept of trajectory depicts "social processes structured by conditional chains of events that one cannot avoid without high costs, constant breaks of expectations, and a growing and irritating sense of loss of control over one's life circumstances" (Riemann and Schütze 1991:337).<sup>1</sup>

The dynamics of a trajectory are connected with a nagging sense of losing control over one's life, being subject to overwhelming external circumstances, with growing alienation from the life world and oneself. Then, a person stops intentionally planning their everyday activities and more and more often reacts passively to external circumstances. An individual falls into an increasing existential abyss and has the feeling of being trapped or standing against the wall (Riemann and Schütze 1991; Waniek 2016). In this context, trajectory potential can be understood as the conditional framework for the gradual or fast emergence of a trajectory of suffering. A trajectory potential may develop due to illness or death of close friends and relatives, the experience of war or physical violence, other forms of abuse and lack of recognition, et cetera. In the context of precarity, as a potential source of the emergence of a trajectory, the structural inability to conduct one's career

following internal and external expectations can be mentioned, which under certain circumstances (which beg for in-depth exploration) may translate into other fields of biographical experience.

Schütze (2006) points out that, in the case of a trajectory potential, we can distinguish its two basic components: biographical vulnerability dispositions and a set of key adversities within the current life situation. At the same time, trajectory potentials play an important role in the course of the trajectory process, which consists of the following phases:

- The gradual accumulation of trajectory potentials;
- The sudden crossing of the protection wall against activation of the decrease or loss of a capacity for intentional action;
- Attempt to regain an unstable equilibrium;
- Destabilization;
- Breakdown in the organization of daily life and orientation towards oneself;
- Attempts at theoretical reworking;
- Attempts to cope and control the trajectory or escape from it (Riemann and Schütze 1991).

The phases indicated do not necessarily occur in every case of the biographical trajectory of suffering. Schütze (2012) also points out that various kinds of "deviations" and "transformations" may occur that can be carefully discovered in the reconstructive analysis of particular interviews. Waniek (2016:119) finds the sources of the abovementioned components of a trajectory potential in family relations in the first case (biographical vulnerability dispositions), and she explores the second aspect (a set of key adversities within the current life situation) in the mechanism of entering the labor market. In this sense, precarity can be seen as a salient source of

<sup>1</sup> Other process structures include: (1) biographical action schemes (describing "the intentional mode of relating to one's own identity and to one's own potential for construction and realization of certain plans of one's own life" [Schütze 1992:191]); (2) biographical metamorphoses ("processes of being confronted by the sudden emergence of some self-creative capacity which drastically changes one's outlook on life and the world" [Schütze 1992:191]); (3) institutional expectation patterns in which "persons are following up institutionally shaped and normatively defined courses of life, for example, careers in organizations or the family life cycle that opens up family life in the first part of adulthood" (Schütze 2008:11).

trajectory potentials. As a consequence of low and insecure earnings, lack of insurance, limited creditworthiness, and other issues related to precarious employment, young people face problems not only in the context of their occupational life but also in building stable relationships with their environment. It has been demonstrated that precarity can affect family and social relations and extend the process of entering adulthood by young people. In response to precarization, various ways of managing precarity occur. They range from its “normalization,” which is characterized as redefining uncertainty as a transitory career phase or accepting it as a “necessary” cost of autonomy and creativity, to its critique and individual and collective resistance against it.

In this article, normalization, critique, and resistance against precarity will be explored. It can be assumed that both individual and collective practices of managing precarity can limit trajectory potentials; yet, they are conditioned by (socio-)psychological and (socio-)economic factors. In the context of the former, the mechanism of biographical work can play an exceptionally salient role. As stated by Anselm L. Strauss (1993), virtually every form of a life story, whether written, spoken, or conceived, is a process of symbolic ordering of the events in which biographical work is (usually) involved. By recalling and adjusting concepts to explain the disorder of the past, which is done in the process of biographical work, we make sense of our lives. Biographical work as an element of reflection, ordering, or closing the history of life is connected with a process of redefining identity (Kaźmierska 2008:29). In the biographical narratives, one can see and observe their connection with the formation of the self-concept, the construction of identity (identity work), accompanied by the actual process of working through

the past in one’s biography (Golczyńska-Grondas 2012). It can be said that the activation of biographical work is a kind of response to life crises and difficult situations, unexpected, sudden, requiring some significant change in individual habits, lifestyles, or expectations. The need to initiate or intensify biographical work is linked to the (sometimes sudden) need to reorient one’s biography. As it tends to be a strenuous and time-consuming activity, it is reasonable and appropriate, according to Schütze (2008), to call this activity “work” (Betts et al. 2008).

In the moments of life crises, biographical work is a prerequisite for putting one’s history in order again under circumstances of cognitive and emotional chaos. In ordinary, non-crisis situations, it can be an activity undertaken on an ongoing basis, quickly, or even subconsciously while continuing other activities. The ability to undertake biographical work is linked to the course of biography and involves learning processes to a large extent, and depends on the structural and contingent barriers that are inherent to individuals (narrators) (Schütze 2008). In practice, biographical work is based on the mechanisms of recalling memories through autobiographical narration, during which the attribution of symbolic meanings to them takes place, placing them in a certain historical order of the self and comparing alternative possibilities for interpreting one’s history. Importantly for the methodology of biographical interviews, the mental and emotional activity of biographical work is formed and initiated in conversation (Mažeikienė 2012). Fritz Schütze (2008) notes that it is essential and usually constituted in dialogue with significant others and oneself. As Kaja Kaźmierska and Fritz Schütze (2013:134) argue, reflexive “engagement” with biographical work is a certain way of ordering the structure of narratives to bring out biographical processes. In the fol-

lowing sections of the article, we will introduce the case of Helena, a young woman experiencing precarity in the context of a small town in Lower Silesia, to explore the emergence of trajectory potentials at the intersection of working and private life and the ways of managing them.

## Methodological Note

The case of Helena was chosen out of the sample of 63 biographical narrative interviews collected in the PREWORK project in 2016-2017. It has been earlier discussed by Mrozowicki and Trappmann (2020), who analyzed the relationships between precarious working lives and experiences beyond work. For the sake of the current article, there are three reasons behind the choice of the interview with Helena. First, her biography is one of the most precarious in the PREWORK collection concerning limited material, social, and cultural resources at her disposal. If biographical work can counterbalance the precariousness of Helena's situation and create a potential for individual and even collective awareness, it should also be present in other cases in which material and symbolic means to "immunize" oneself against the precarity (Lorey 2015) are more developed. Second, even though there is a growing body of biographical research on precarity in Poland, it often concerns precarious middle-classes (Haratyk et al. 2017; Waniek 2019). This article addresses the need for case studies of people representing the category of low-paid, low-educated, and low-skilled workers (Kozek, Kubisa, and Zieleńska 2017). Third, as mentioned earlier, the authors felt obliged to share some of the salient categories developed jointly with Fritz Schütze during a PREWORK project workshop in 2018.

In the PREWORK project, empirical data were collected with the use of a modified biographical nar-

rative interview method by Schütze (1983; 2008). Our way of conducting biographical narrative interviews and our analytical approach were shaped by the procedures developed by Schütze (1983; 2008), but we also made some modifications. Interviews started with an unstructured conversation before we asked informants to tell us their complete life stories (from childhood to the present moment). After the narrator had presented their narrative (which we did not interrupt), additional biographical questions followed that were focused on recalling events and experiences that were unclear (or implausible) in a more detailed way in the main story. In the third part, and this was the PREWORK project's modification of Schütze's original recommendations, a semi-structured interview guide was used to further explore informants' experiences of work, their images of decent work and a good life, their civic involvement (or the lack thereof), their class identities, the images of socio-economic order, and their plans. Interviews were collected with three categories of young (18-35) people: (1) workers with temporary employment and civil-law contracts, (2) those involved in various unpaid or low-paid traineeships, and (3) temporarily unemployed following a previous experience of a non-standard employment contract. Recruitment for interviews was based on personal contacts, but also proceeded via social media and trade unions. In the course of the analysis, new categories (e.g., participation in labor- and socio-political organizations) emerged as salient categories for sampling, in line with the logic of theoretical sampling.

In the article, we present the case analysis on Helena. In the first part, we followed the procedures of the sequential analysis as spelled out by Schütze and, in the second part, coding procedures developed by the (classic) grounded theory methodology

(Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978). In the case of the former, the main goal of the analysis was to reconstruct the internal logic of the case as a combination of biographical process structures (Schütze 2005). It involved the following steps: a text sort differentiation aimed at reconstructing the communicative schemes of an interview; a sequential structural analysis designed to explore biographical process structures and other social processes; an analytical abstraction in the course of which an overall biographical structuring (*Gestalt*) as a sequence of biographical process structures was reconstructed (Schütze 2008). In the course of the analysis, we were also inspired by theoretical sensitivity developed during open coding and selective coding carried out on the entire sample of interviews (Trappmann et al. 2021).

## The Case of Helena: An Introduction

Helena was born in 1997 in a small town (EM) in the Lower Silesia region in Poland into a family with two brothers; later on, her younger sister was born. Her mother was a hairdresser, and her father was an electrician. They came from the Greater Poland region, not far from Poznan, and have no close family in EM. At the moment of the interview, her mother was unemployed due to her poor health, and her father worked in a Czech factory near the border between Poland and the Czech Republic after many years of unemployment. Her family struggled with poverty, magnified by the problem of alcoholism of her father. During her childhood, Helena's parents did not show her much love. Since she was a teenager, it was the narrator's responsibility to look after her younger sister and her mother, who suffered from depression. Her father attempted to kill himself when she was ten years old, and one of her brothers committed suicide.

Helena attended primary school in EM. She claimed that she was expelled from gymnasium<sup>2</sup> in EM and had to attend school in another town because she and her brothers were stigmatized as troublemakers. Her education at the gymnasium combined general and vocational training, and she specialized in the training of a shop assistant. She mentioned her current plans to continue her education at the Academy of Physical Education<sup>3</sup> in another region, yet she admitted that she lacked resources and family support to do so.

The narrator started working when she was 13 years old while attending school. She worked, without any contract, as a housekeeper, babysitter, and then shop assistant. She passed the money earned to her family. She had an apprenticeship during the entire school time as a shop assistant, and she mentions that she learned many things about the occupation. During her vacations, she also worked in a seaside town as a shop assistant. Then, she completed an internship co-funded by the Employment Office in a small local store in EM as a shop assistant. Next, she continued working with a civil law contract at the same place.

Helena did not mention her intimate relationships. She said that she was raped (by a person from her town) at the age of 17 and alluded to therapy that she underwent afterward. She complained that she got bogged down in her hometown, but she dreamt of living independently from her family.

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<sup>2</sup> In Poland, the gymnasium was the lower secondary school; during 1999-2019, it educated young people aged 13-16; its completion was mandatory to start education in a high school, technical college, or basic vocational school; gymnasiums were closed on August 31, 2019, as a result of the 2017 reform of the education system.

<sup>3</sup> In Poland, there are six physical education (sport) universities; all of them are public and have the rank of academies.

She had a boyfriend at the moment of the interview and thought about starting a family in the future. She spoke of herself as an adult, experienced, and responsible. She also mentioned that she was determined to achieve an easier life. Therefore, she worked hard for a living and dreamed of a brighter future.

### **A Biographical Case Analysis: Precariousness, Precarity, and Biographical Work**

According to Fritz Schütze (2008), the analysis of a narrative interview should start with the phase of a formal textual investigation (focusing on a differentiation of the different schemes of communication—narration, argumentation, and description—and their functions in this context), which also includes taking into account how the interviewee understood the context of the interview and how they made sense of the opening question. In this phase, it is also important to self-critically look at one's interviewing. In Helena's case, a mutual understanding between her and the interviewers (three members of the research team, two females aged 40 and 26, and one male aged 40) was reached, and the informant started her story appropriately, that is, she went along with the request to tell her life history, did not merely feel obliged to go along with the interviewer's request, but ratified the action scheme of the interview and could get something out of it. In the first sentences, we can observe the pattern that will frequently be present in the whole narrative—the narrative communication scheme was densely intertwined with argumentative and descriptive parts:

[in response to the first question about her life story]  
Of course, of course. In... yes. If I am to, uh, if I am to

start, it was here, here my life started, my whole life, so to say. Ach... everything started, in fact, in primary school. There was not such a point in my life in which I would believe that this is how my current life would look. I imagined everything differently. That I would study, that I would go to a sports school. That my life would be full of energy, uh, and joy in the first place. And a lot, a lot of optimism. And this approach to life, with a smile, with joy. Later, my problems started, already in school, in junior secondary school. Uh, I was expelled from school due to the fact that here, too, many people knew my family. My brothers were total troublemakers. And everybody thought that I was the bad one, that I was also able to fall so low that nobody would be able to help me get up again.

Helena started referencing primary school in which, as she claimed, her life began. It was only a figure of speech; however, it was significant that she chose that phase of her life for the opening statement. It can be interpreted as a turning point that was mentioned to demonstrate a possibility of an alternative path of her life in which she would have studied and attended the Academy of Physical Education—a university that specializes in sports sciences. Unfortunately, the idyllic vision could not have been fulfilled. Following a brief argumentative commentary, she moved back to the actual line of events in her educational career, which was far from her primary expectations. The pattern of moving back and forth between actual and imagined (or alternative) courses of biographical events was a unique feature of Helena's presentation in the interview. Even though it could have also been observed in other biographical narrative interviews, extended argumentative statements and theoretical comments almost entirely dominated the first part of the interview with Helena. When the narrator spoke about specific situations in her life, such references were marked by

an almost complete lack of time attributions, which gave the listeners the impression that they could have happened either recently or in early childhood. There were only scarce references to particular life encounters and interactions with other people. An important question is how to interpret such a way of telling one's life history? Helena finishes her narrative with a disintegrated narrative coda: there are many argumentative commentaries embedded in her narrative, and, at times, argumentation becomes dominant and tends to drown her narrative, as well.

In our opinion, the scarcity of narration in the interview with Helena may be explained in at least two ways. First, it could be seen as a result of complex trajectory potentials regarding precarious family relations, work experiences, and social relationships more broadly. Being entrapped in uncontrollable processes that resulted from the precariousness and precarity of Helena's life and work situations made it difficult for the narrator to chronologically order her biography. Its chaotic reconstruction mirrors the disorder of her actual life experiences. Second, it can be suggested that extended argumentative commentaries reflected Helena's biographical work through which she attempted to make sense of her predicaments and to reconstruct her identity affected by a biographical trajectory of suffering. While both interpretations can be seen as complementary, the first one is focused on Helena's incapacity to build a coherent identity, and the second on her continuous efforts to do so. Following the case analysis, the subsequent part of the article argues that despite super-precarious conditions, Helena retained her capacity to do biographical work, and thus the second hypothesis proves to have stronger explanatory power. Yet, Helena's effectiveness of doing biographical work for overcoming biographical predicaments remains limited due to a very low

level of all kinds of social, economic, cultural, and symbolic resources that are at her disposal.

Looking closer at the main ("spontaneous") part of the interview, we can observe how the actual and imagined courses of biographical events continue to shape the logic of her self-presentation. Having started with her school-related story, Helena began to narrate about her work experiences. The transition from education to work was connected with her transfer from general junior secondary school to a vocational school that combined education and occupational training (the informant does not clarify what type of school it was). She referred to it as an event beyond her control—a regrettable consequence of her family background and the misbehavior of her brothers. Since the rationale of that administrative decision is unknown, it can only be speculated that the lack of family recognition might not have been the only factor behind it. As a result, Helena unintentionally started a specific career path that eventually led her to work as a shop assistant.

I was transferred to a school in which I did junior secondary school and vocational school at the same time, and I can also say that I have no higher education. This was an ordinary junior secondary school, and the fact that I had professional training was another matter. I finished school, finished training to be the shop assistant that I am now. And... what else can I say here? Hmm, later I went for a traineeship. I finished that. There was a post-traineeship agreement, rather short, uh, but this was normal work, normal, normal conditions. Uh, and, how to say it, learning that this is the adult life. That these are the obligations of an adult. And, in fact, this is not, uh, these events are not always pleasant. Uh, many things happened, uh, like, in my family, this was an escape. Towards people. Uh, earlier, I was surrounded by a group of friends, but

they started to be against me. I started running away to work, lost all my friends, all my friends. Now I am left to myself. I work, go back home, sit at home. Ordinary, gray monotony. I only lack, I mean, only family, yes. Children, a husband. And, in fact, this is all. Uh, there are no, there is no entertainment. Hmm, so this life and these events would make more sense. Uh, even though I try to be a positive person, always smiling. Unfortunately, life kicks you, totally kicks you in the teeth. And life showed me that this is... that this is not... a fairytale. That this is, mostly this is a struggle. That is, we, people, we are like, let's say, proverbially, in a jungle. Everybody fights for survival. Everybody does it the way they can. Uh, not everybody manages, and everybody, the majority of young people, reach the bottom.

The above quotation shows how Helena combined different plots of her life story from the very beginning of her interview. She recalled the school transfer and admitted that it let her work as a shop assistant. However, she linked it with the phrase "learning that this is the adult life," which should be understood as an introduction to the story of the loss of meaningful and supportive social ties. In the quote, markers of precariousness can be found, including those related to her family ("many things happened...in my family"), fragile social networks (losing friends, lack of social support, isolation at home), and a blocked educational career. Yet, she does not elaborate in detail on the social processes that led to her disappointment and remain at the level of argumentative commentaries and generalizations, including those concerning the situation of young people in Poland. Her situation is framed in terms of a "social jungle" (Narojek 1982), a lack of trustful relationships, and the collective degradation of young people. In the further parts of the interview, all of those threads are mentioned in argu-

mentative sequences on the situation of herself and people like her in EM and Poland, more broadly.

The structure of the first part of Helena's interview can be described by the metaphor of a container in which subsequent trajectory potentials are layered. It is important to note that all of them, at some points in the narrator's life, impacted her biography and led to the unfolding of a biographical trajectory of suffering. Overall, the stake for Helena, meaning, the rationale for the actions she undertook, was to regain control over her life and find the resource of stability and safety.

After the education-related story, Helena went on to describe a complicated and hard to control situation in which the precariousness of her family life and the precarity at work were intertwined. She reconstructed the deep financial deprivation of her family and linked it with her need to find a job. It led her to extensive theoretical comments on "unrewarding" working conditions and relations with customers that were the sources of her constant disappointments and the feeling of humiliation. Once again, they were followed by a short narrative part related to the educational and economic exclusion of Helena and her family:

Even though I could say I am not proud of that, that I do not have the appropriate education, as a woman, yes. Everybody knows that the majority of women, some kind of, let's say, also have completed higher education of some kind. I, unfortunately, got blocked. And I had a choice. Either I go to school and have nothing to wear, nothing to wear, or even how to charge the stupid phone. To stay in touch with the more distant family or closer family. And going to work and being able to afford something. Even though, on the other hand, I work, I still cannot afford anything. It

is because I earn little this is completely unrewarding work. And, in fact, if somebody told me that they wanted to be a shop assistant, I would do all in my power to stop this person, so they don't get involved in it. Everything else but a shop assistant. Because this is... this is so monotonous, but unrewarding. People cannot be grateful to us, shop assistants, those who do everything so they can be served quickly and efficiently, so they are satisfied. And they are still able to make it difficult for us. Complain, insult us all the time... And, in fact, if somebody told me a few years back that I would be doing what I am doing now, all my life, uh, so far sacrificed myself for people, I would not believe them. Everybody thinks that, uh, work in the shop that is it. Warm, dry, there is no, no problem. But, here, in your head, everything gets destroyed. If you feel that you are trying, even though I do everything so people are satisfied with what I do. I still get stumbling blocks in my way. All the time, it is humiliation, insults all the time. And I am to smile and say: "Yes, you are right because you are right." There is no way for me to stand up to them.

The above-quoted passage allowed the narrator to demonstrate the contradictory nature of her work situation. She talks about being humiliated by customers, which is an isolating experience. Furthermore, in the next part of the interview, Helena reconstructed relations with her employer and work colleagues as "total exploitation." On the one hand, it was marked by a precarity trap due to limited earnings, a lack of recognition, and supportive social relations. Additionally, the necessity to start work early in her life was interpreted as the main reason behind abandoning her educational aspirations. On the other hand, it was work that let Helena perform her gendered role as a care provider ("adult woman") and the less traditional, but not atypical role of a young working-class woman who supports

her parents financially. That is mentioned in the subsequent parts of the quotation:

And because of that, my life so far was full, full of nerves, unpleasant situations, not nice, really upsetting events, which not everybody can manage, carry on their shoulders, right. But, everybody has a cross to bear. So far on my shoulders falls this obligation, that even though I am as young as I am, I have no family, I have no husband, I have no children, in my head, I have this feeling of being an adult woman as if I had my children, a husband, a family.

In Helena's narrative, precarious and alienating work partially became the space where she could have fulfilled her "family obligation"—reinterpreted religiously as a "cross to bear." In other words, biographical work on precarity helped the narrator find some source of internal strength in extremely insecure and alienating conditions, which can be connected to a specific sense of obligation related to female adulthood and family responsibilities.

The interpretive frame of sacrifice due to family obligations is crucial for the next part of the interview, in which Helena recalled more deeply the family relations and focused on her traumatic dealings with her father. The lack of recognition and support of her father were central to the narrator's ongoing efforts to prove her maturity through work. The theme of precarious family relations and the motif of work as an escape from her family (Piotrowski, Kaźmierska, and Waniek 2011) were interconnected:

In my life, I did not experience anything like, I don't know, my father telling me he was proud of me. He has never told me that. And that is why I ran away here. Some run away to books, read a lot of books, submerge in the world that, that is described in the

book. I run to work. Because I have no other option. I have no option to, I don't know, meet somebody who understands me. Who can grasp me, uh, my way of thinking, my experience would be at least a bit similar to this person's.

Helena narrated about her father in the context of the lack of recognition for efforts to provide for her family. While work was a space of retreat from her fragmented family, it did not offer what the narrator sought for, namely, meaningful social relations (friends), support, and understanding. As a result, it was redefined as another kind of biographical trap. In the next parts of the interview, there are more and more references to how she increasingly suffered in her relationship with her father. The story of his suicide attempts led Helena to narrate, in a very restricted manner, about her attempted suicide. It needs to be mentioned that it was not the only suicide-related story in Helena's family. She had a brother who committed suicide a few years before the interview. The part in which she recalled that situation was very similar to her current situation. In the fragments concerning the relations with her father, Helena also mentioned her psychiatric treatment and went deeper into the description of her psychological condition:

I was, went to psychiatrists, psychologists, took psychoactive drugs, nootropic drugs, because of that I got neurosis. That led to neurological problems, psychiatric issues, everything started to fall on my head, on my shoulders. I started falling apart. But, beyond that, I am mentally really down, I try to show that it is not there. That I am not a person who went through, who saw, uh, continuous fights at home, who was mentally destroyed, "You are such and such, you are the worst," insulted, really, even by people, who... you would not want to hear it from your father, and that

was a common daily thing. They would tell me, for example, my mother never told me anything like that. She would not be able to utter it. I can bet with you that she would not be able to do it. But... for example, my father never had any scruples, no remorse. Even when, when he told me that he never wanted me. That I was a child, simply... not his. That he never loved me. Yes, he was able to say that. He was able to call me the worst names. He was capable of saying that if... if I managed to do what I wanted, it would be for the best. To hear that from your father, it hurts more from your mother, but from your father, that is equally important, because if it was not for my father, I would not be here, right. That is why, that is why things that happened in my, you could say, childhood, even though I am still a child, and I am not ashamed of that. I do not want to pretend that, God knows, I am an adult and all that. That, I think, caused me to decide to run away to work. Because I have contact with people and I see people every day, not everybody is nice. But, I am among people, I am not closed within myself, I do not think about what hurts, what my problems are, but I think that when I am among people, I have to smile. And, uh, as they say, to put on a brave face. Show that everything is OK, that I am an OK person. And, and, in fact, nothing can destroy me. Nothing can destroy me.

In response to psychological problems, Helena sought both the professional help of psychiatrists and supportive social relations at work. As she mentioned in the later parts of the interview, she could not afford private psychiatric consultancy due to limited financial resources, so she decided to discontinue therapy. The social environment at work also proved to be unhelpful; for instance, despite serious psychiatric problems, Helena admitted that she could not take sick leave because her boss would be "mad" at her. Vulnerability dispositions developed at home,

including the lack of recognition of the narrator's value by her father, blocked her biographical identity formation, and scarce institutional support (intervention of educational institutions being limited to moving Helena to another school for "difficult kids") made the narrator accept her precarious work environment as the only available escape from general life precariousness. Lacking the support of other people and institutions, such as her school, the local employment office, and the social welfare center, Helena could only rely on her biographical work to regain at least appearances of control ("a brave face") and restore the source of inner strength. The conviction that "nothing can destroy her" may sound unrealistic, but it seemed to well-reflect Helena's attitude towards her biography, in which she was the only source of agency in her life.

The biographical work of Helena had a gendered character not only due to her reference to a violent and uncaring father as a negative reference point for her biographical identity construction. It was also because it helped her situate her problems in the context of women's fate in general, represented by the story of her mother. Comparing herself and her mother, Helena saw many similarities, including the danger of being trapped in abusive and suffocating family relations reproduced by a strong, moral obligation to permanently and unconditionally help family members and care for them. Recalling the dramatic events of domestic violence perpetrated by her drunken father, the narrator explicitly refers to collective, gendered categories:

He used to drink, notoriously, uh, there were arguments at home, not only shouting, violence as well. Uh, it is not easy to watch it and wake up every day with a smile going to school. Or, I do not know, watching your mother at night when she sleeps, so fa-

ther would not hurt her. Because that... because I was also a witness of how my father tried to suffocate my mother. I, in fact, as a small child that did not understand anything, because I did not know life at all, and I did not know how brutal it could be and how many unpleasant things a woman can encounter. Not so much a person as such, but, in fact, a woman, what life a woman can have, be kicked by it in the teeth, and how many unpleasant things can happen.

The story of her father's violence at home and "unpleasant things" a woman can encounter serves as a background for another, even more traumatic, narrative—the story of the rape Helena experienced two years before the interview. That devastating experience had been faded out to some extent by the narrator, but was so crucial that she could not miss it entirely. First, she only mentioned it with one sentence in the context of the loss of contact with her friends who "turned away" from her not long ago. She did not specify details of losing friends and did not yet refer to the fact of being raped. However, she stressed that they started to be "against her." Next, she returned to it after she was describing her relations with her father. In that moment of the interview, she mentioned the "unpleasant event" that happened among friends that we can connect with the previous description of losing friends:

Because I have already... despite my young age, I have lived through so many things. The difficult climate at home. Among friends, so to say, a very unpleasant event that I do not wish any woman to go through, what I went through. It was, it was not so long ago, only two years ago.

Eventually, she narrated it in a more detailed way in the final part of the first part of the interview, which combined with the coda structure:

I dealt with problems because despite coming from this and other family problems at 17 I was raped. And that was such an experience that... I could not live normally. Nobody would want to go through that. And even more so, I was alone at the time. There was nobody I could tell about it, who would help me, would go with me to a stupid doctor. To learn, simply, if everything was ok. I already accepted that what happened, happened. But, later, when there were moments I was tormented by that person. And blackmailed. By a person from EM. It was not easy. Keep seeing the perpetrator, the person who hurt me. That is why I would do everything to run away from here. But, I cannot, I have nowhere to go. I am blocked from all sides. My mother, even though she sees that everything hurts me, memories come back, I cannot sleep at night, there is no clear thinking, sober thoughts, like. I do not think normally about life, but all the time only: "Helena, you still have time, you are young. Work a bit, you will save some money, you will go where you want, start everything afresh. You will cut all this off, you will not see the people who hurt you." But, it is always like this that if I do not give them money, they will take it from me. One way or the other. What else can I say?

It needs to be highlighted that the story of the rape was preceded by a longer fragment that started with recalling her father's statement that he did not want Helena to be born. She recalled her mother as a character similar to her ("good heart, soft bottom") and passed to a longer argumentation on people's disgracefulness. She eventually commented again on the harm she experienced from her relatives. In the final part of the coda, she once more referred to the choices she had made and which she regretted, such as not continuing her education. In a way similar to the beginning of the interview, she revealed an alternative vision of her life in which she would

spend her time like a "normal teenager" enjoying time with her friends. Once again, she alluded to premature adulthood, the lack of a loving and supporting family, and forced self-reliance ("I learned that nobody will help me if I cannot deal with it myself").

In this context, the traumatic experience of being raped at the age of 17 represented a peak of the biographical trajectory of suffering and the key to the understanding of Helena's entire story. She revealed that event at the very end of the first part of the interview. As a result of her reflexivity, which was, most likely, reinforced by a psychological (or psychiatric) treatment, Helena developed self-awareness of the negative feedback loops of her precarious family life, vulnerable social relations, and precarious work. The psychiatric treatment itself is only briefly mentioned and was not further elaborated by the narrator. Most importantly, it is not recalled in a positive light as an event that helped Helena develop a new sense of her life, but rather an event that contributed to further problems related to taking "psychoactive" drugs.

I was, went to psychiatrists, psychologists, took psychoactive drugs, nootropic drugs, because of that I got neurosis. That led to neurological problems, psychiatric issues, everything started to fall on my head, on my shoulders.

The narrator does not consciously link her capacities to reflect upon her life to psychological or psychiatric treatment. Moreover, the reconstructed, very chaotic character of her biographical narration also suggests that the psychological support was not fully successful in providing her with a coherent sense of self-identity. On the other hand, contrary to the suggestions coming from earlier studies (Schütze

2015), the treatment has not completely blocked Helena's capacity to develop a critical reflection about her situation. She reflected on and recognized her precarity trap in terms of "being blocked from all sides," lacking solidarity, social relations, and supportive institutions in particular, in the moments of deep biographical crises in which social support was needed. Having been raped, Helena felt abandoned not only by her friends but also by the local community that accepted the presence of the perpetrator and excluded the victim. The local community did not punish the perpetrator. That traumatic experience stigmatizes Helena, not the perpetrator. Perhaps the most pessimistic overtone appears in the last sentences of the first part of the interview. Her mother's advice to save money was right, but Helena did not delude herself—all money she would earn would eventually be taken by her family.

The case of Helena was one of the most extreme examples of the intersection of precarity and precariousness in the sample of interviews collected in the PREWORK project. Yet, even in this case, some positive consequences of biographical work can be observed. It is not known what the origin of Helena's biographical work is. We suppose that it is a derivative of contacting a psychiatrist and psychologist, and it results from her natural abilities. First, biographical work helped the narrator recognize the limitations and contradictions of precarious work as a strategy of coping with precarious life, which can be seen as a salient aspect of the "roads to awareness," to social and public discourses, and socio-political activation. Second, it made it possible to define some of Helena's problems as collective ones, experienced by young people or women. Third, as it appeared in particular in the final part of the interview, reflexivity enabled the narrator to redefine her biographical resources in positive terms, as

something that can be used in the future; a potential marker of overcoming a biographical trajectory of suffering. Asked about her plans, Helena mentioned her dream of becoming a kindergarten teacher. That plan does not seem realistic, but is not impossible. She said:

I will surely enjoy life one day. That is, uh, now that is collecting experiences. So, in the future, when I have a problem, I know how to deal with it. And what is my strong suit, and what is not, right? We all have them. Also, sensitive points, but not everybody manages to discover them.

Based on the story of Helena, and similar stories in the PREWORK project, some other, more general features of the "roads to awareness" of precarious workers can be identified: (a) questioning and delegitimizing insecure, low-paid jobs and abusive workplace relationships: a realistic definition of the precariousness of individual work situation; (b) defining precarity as a collective rather than individual problem concerning intersecting social inequalities along with class, gender, age, and other lines; (c) starting voluntary social support and counseling work in one's social environment (e.g., willingness to support other people in a difficult situation). The existence of the latter approach is visible in Helena's answer to the question about the social group she would identify herself with; yet, she did not elaborate on activities she undertook:

**Interviewer:** Listen, and with all the baggage, who you are. With all your person, with what you do, what was, what your past was, with your aspirations, taking into account everything, where would you place yourself... in the group division that you mentioned, where are you in that division?

**Helena:** Right, in that, in that group of people who are able to do something for somebody. A person who, despite that I have my own life, my problems, I am trying to help others, get involved in other people's lives. Even though I cannot deal with my problems, I am able to deal with other people's problems, which is sick. That is in my, in my opinion, and it is, in fact, that, that is sick. I cannot deal with myself, with my problems, but with the problems of, I don't know, a friend, or, I don't know, somebody from the family. I advise, I tell them, even though I have no experience.

In the interview with Helena, the next step, namely, (d) starting a socio-political gospel that would translate into new political or social movements was not visible, and the entire story was dominated by the search for "escape" from biographical suffering. That is the reference to the discourse of the need for collective mobilization. Yet, it is worth mentioning that some forms of collective organizing of precarious workers did emerge in other cases in the Polish sample of precarious young workers.

## Conclusions

In the article, biographical work in the story of a precarious young shop assistant, Helena, was scrutinized employing the textually focused biographical analysis of her life course and current experiences, based on a biographical narrative interview conducted with her. Following the interpretive sociological tradition by Schütze (2008:249), biographical work "consists of shaping one's own personal identity by referring to oneself" in several dimensions, such as "autobiographical recollection, reflection about alternative interpretations of one's life-course tendencies, self-critical attempts of understanding one's own misconceptions of oneself and self-chosen or self-erected impediments, a circumspect

assessment of impediments superimposed by others and by structural conditions, imagining future courses of life that support the overall 'gestalt' of the unfolding biographical identity as essentially one's own." As documented in the analysis, Helena's biographical work contains two types of reflections: on current working and living conditions, as well as on individual socio-biographical process structures and features. In the narrative rendering of Helena's autobiography, her practices of narrating, describing, and evaluating her life situation and precarious working conditions were studied. In line with earlier arguments of Castel (2000) on the twofold nature of precarity as economic uncertainty and social disembedding, precarious life situation, and the precarity work traps were intertwined as reference points for shaping the fragile biographical identity of the narrator. The analysis confirmed the observations of earlier studies that the scarcity of meaningful and supportive social networks and limited institutional support makes managing work-related precarity difficult (Manolchev et al. 2018; Mrozowicki and Trappmann 2020).

Unlike the studies focused on the macro-structural aspects of precarity as the mechanism of class formation (Standing 2011; Wright 2016), this article offered a micro-sociological exploration of the precariousness and precarity as conditions of individual life and work experiences. The analysis of Helena's story demonstrated, first, the fragility and vulnerability of a personal life course burdened with cumulated features of precariousness, that is, a life course dominated by the biographical process structure of trajectory and the typical threats associated with structural precarity work traps that cause a loss of trust, difficulties in defining and interpreting complex interactions and situations. Second, it showed the potential for developing and actively building

a critical and creative biographical identity; that was combined with self-confident self-esteem that was partly due to structuring one's biography, that is, biographical work. Third, the case reconstruction demonstrated how the narrator's biographical work was connected with a potential of undertaking a kind of relational work—instead of isolated individual actions—a relational work of shaping and improving the general working and living conditions of a young woman. It was visible in the declared readiness of Helena to “do something” for other people and engage in dealing with problems of other people, in particular her family, but also her friends. As part of that process, Helena attempted to regain confidence in herself and actively explored her vulnerability, general fragility, and uncertainty (precariousness), and that was the core of her biographical work.

Fourth, and finally, the case of Helena revealed the possibility and relevance of biographical work even in the most difficult socio-economic circumstances. It can be assumed that were it not for her persistent argumentation, reflection, or commentary, Helena's biography would be emotionally unbearable for her. Thanks to the constant return to certain themes (the obligation to cope with the precarious world, physical and emotional violence and abuse, the responsibility towards loved ones, caring for siblings), Helena found a meaning for her suffering. Importantly, the struggle with the trajectory of suffering did not, in her case, preclude work (perhaps still preliminary and impossible to realize fully) on a biographical action scheme, which would finally allow the dreams outlined in the alternative visions of her life to come true. Proposing an empirically grounded conceptualization of the “roads to awareness” of precarious young workers in place of abstract debates on the “precariat” as a new social class, this article can also

be seen as a contribution to sociological imagination (Mills 1967) that seeks to understand the sources of individual problems in socio-structural and institutional processes affecting individual biographies. In that way, the article goes beyond the existing conceptualizations of the emergence of the precariat as the result of political mobilization by various “external” political forces, including populist social movements and political parties (Standing 2011). Instead, it explored in detail “internal,” subject-driven factors and emphasized the relevance of biographical work, its potential, and limitations for the emergence of critical consciousness.

Going beyond Helena's case alone, it is important to emphasize the relativity of the category of precarity as objectively harmful or biographically burdening to individuals without any rescue. It may also be one of the few ways to emancipate people affected by precariousness beyond work. Precarious work can be an escape from precariousness, and that is what the case of Helena shows. However, the escape from precariousness by undertaking insecure and low-paid jobs presents—in particular in a longer perspective—a risk of being trapped in a situation of biographical trajectory. In this context, there is an urgent need for institutional intervention to help the precarious youth, like Helena, in their transitions to adulthood, gaining independence from their family, and entering the labor market. The analysis demonstrated that precarity might also be seen as the result of institutional failure to provide such support.

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