



# Coping with precarity: the case of young precarious workers in Poland and Germany

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# Overview

- Introduction
- Theoretical inspirations
- Methodology of research
- Tentative results
- Conclusions

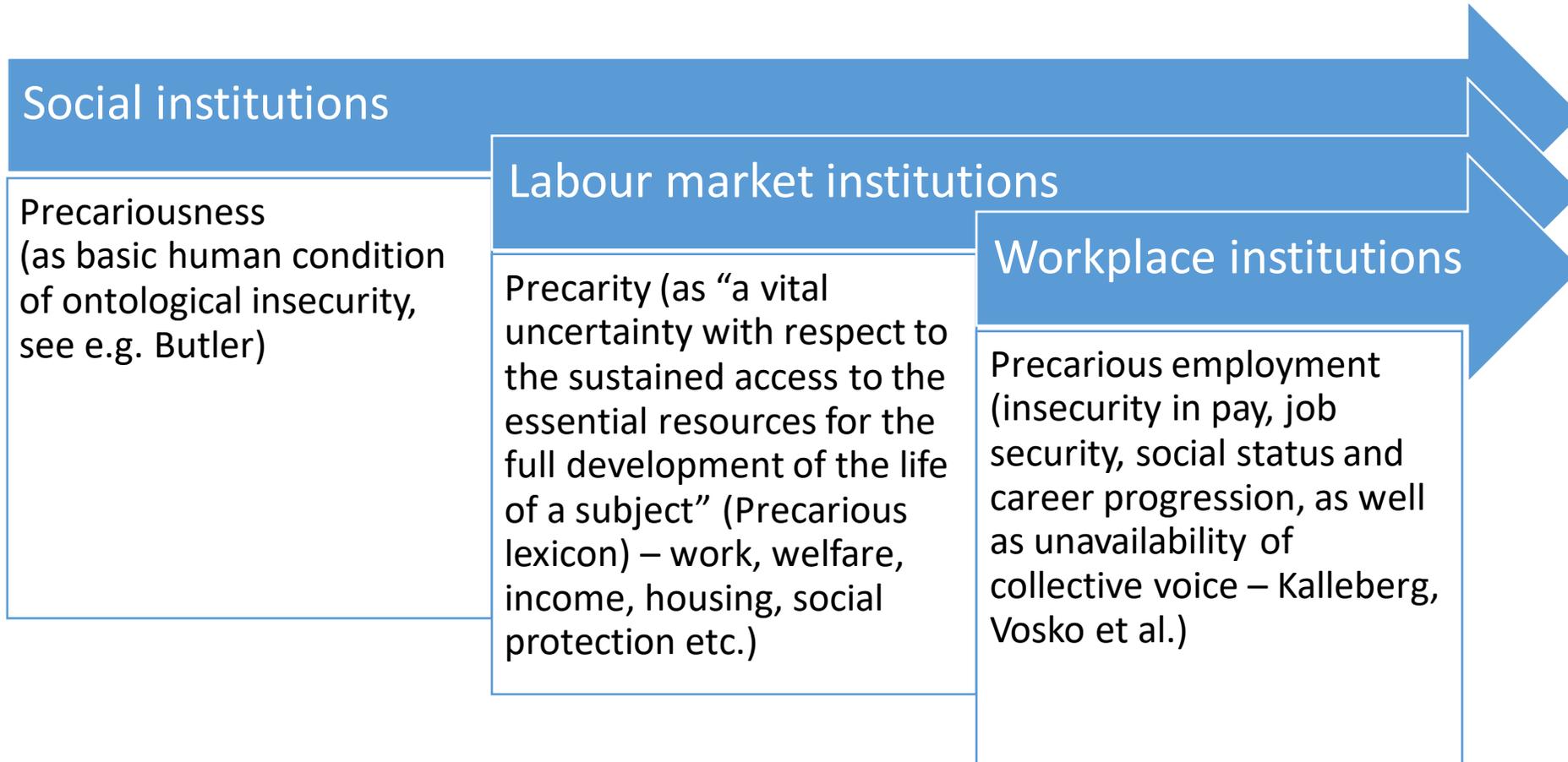
# Introduction

- Young workers as a buffer of labour market changes in PL and DE:
  - Very high level of temporary employment in PL and rising level of part-time in DE
  - Increase in the at risk of poverty rates and in work at risk of poverty rates in DE
  - Greater economic exclusion as a result of precarity
- Despite insecurity, relatively high level of life satisfaction (Eurostat 2013; PREWORK 2017) & limited protests – what are the mechanisms of biographical coping with precarity?
- Exploring the biographical conditions, properties and consequences of coping practices developed by young precarious workers in PL&DE

# Theoretical inspirations (I)

- Critical realist approach to life projects/strategies: the relevance of reflexivity mediating between structure and agency [Archer 2003,2007]
- The context of three transitions
  - The discussion on increasingly complex and individualised transitions to the adulthood [Furlong 2013; Maguire, Ball 2012; Szafraniec 2011]
  - Transition to precarious employment on the labour market and its “normalisation” [Dörre & Castel, 2009; Lorey 2016; Vosko 2010]
  - The socio-economic transformations taking place in PL and DE
    - Three waves of precarisation in **Poland** after 1989: (1) shock therapy; (2) flexibilisation of employment (1990s/2000s); (3) economic slowdown in late 2000s
    - The waves of precarisation in **Germany**: (1) Labour market reforms and Agenda 2010 in 2005; (2) Normalisation and stabilisation of precarity after economic slowdown (2008+) – the disciplining effects on labour force

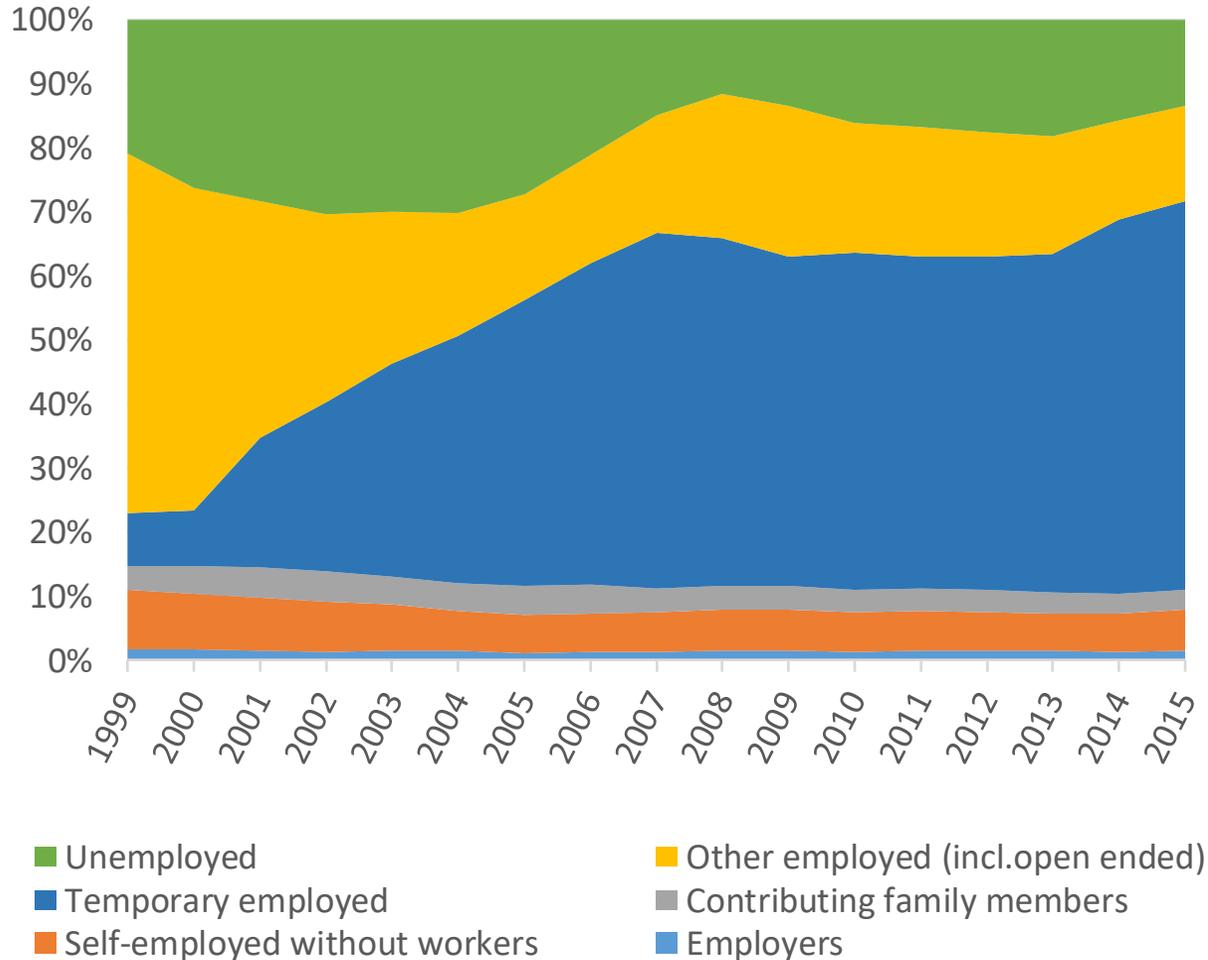
# Theoretical inspirations (II)



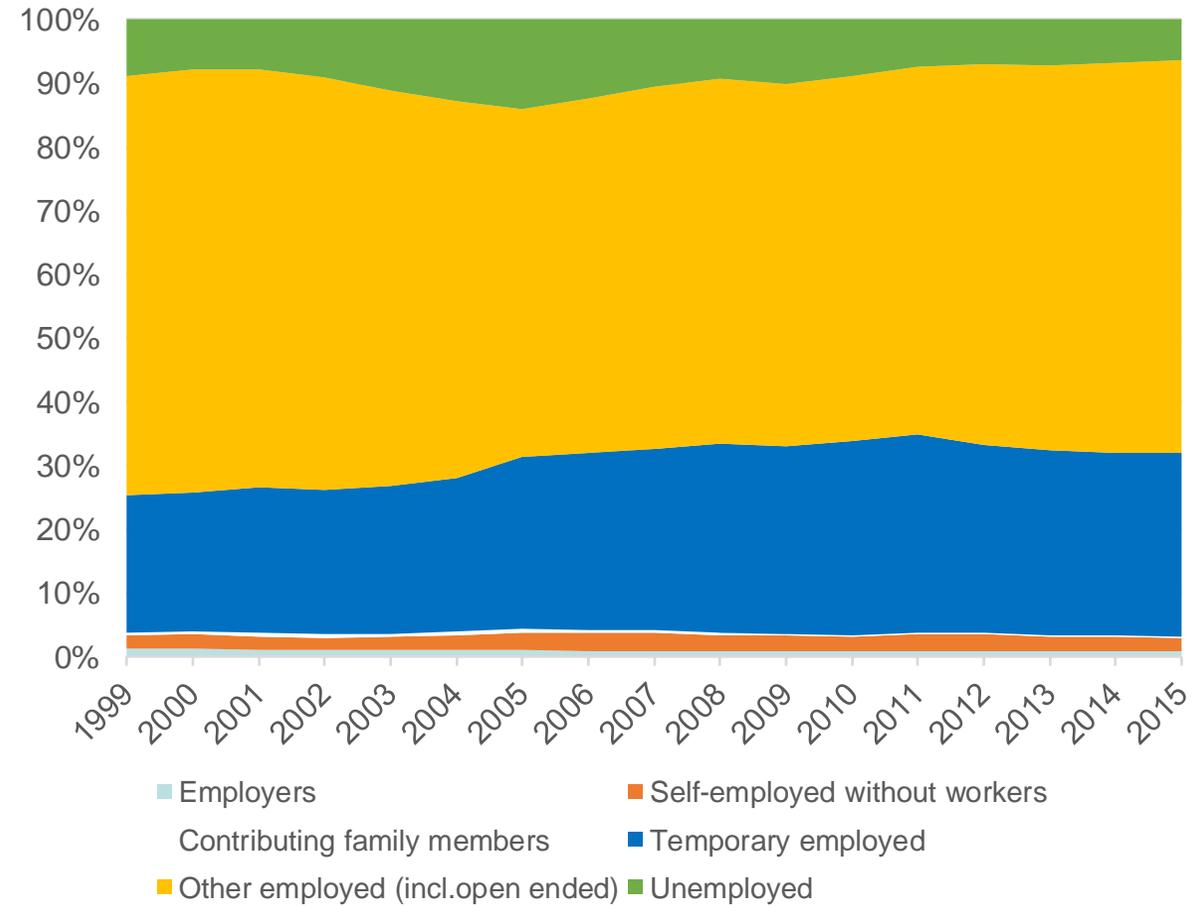
**Emergent, processual, historical and relational nature of precarity and its relationship with institutional and class orders (Hardy 2016)**

# The zone of temporary work (20-29 y.o.)

POLAND



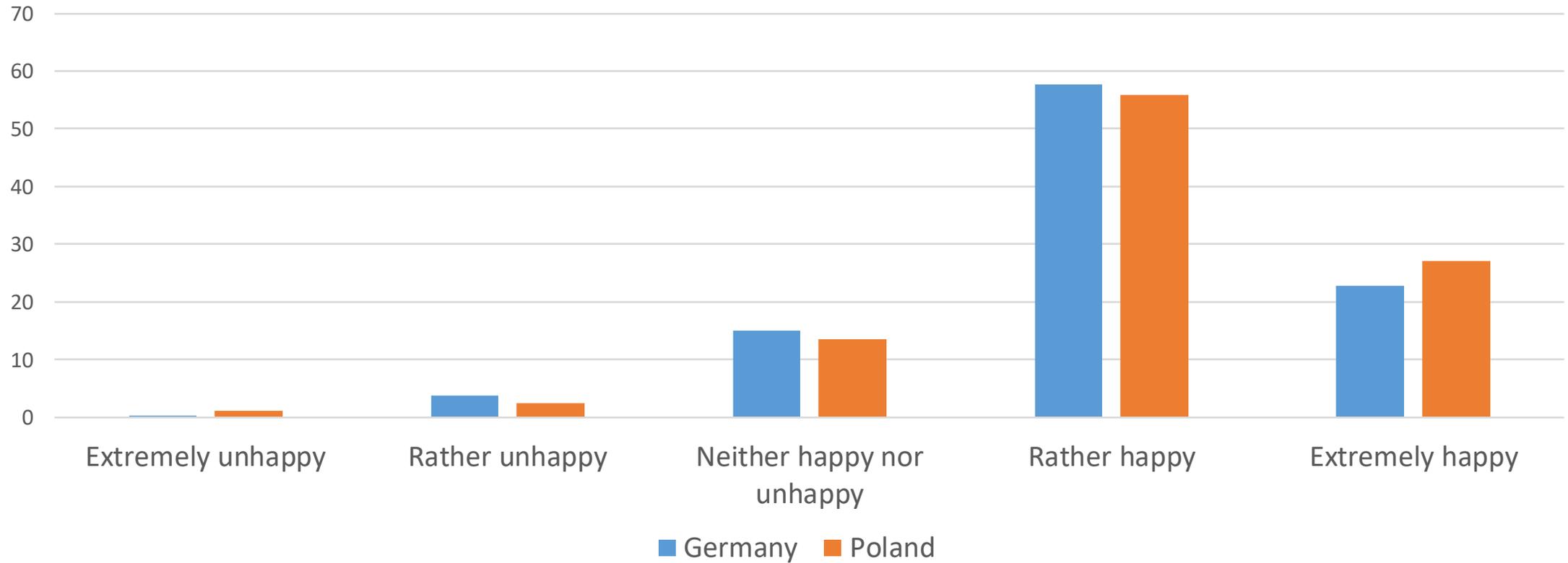
GERMANY



Source: Eurostat, own calculations

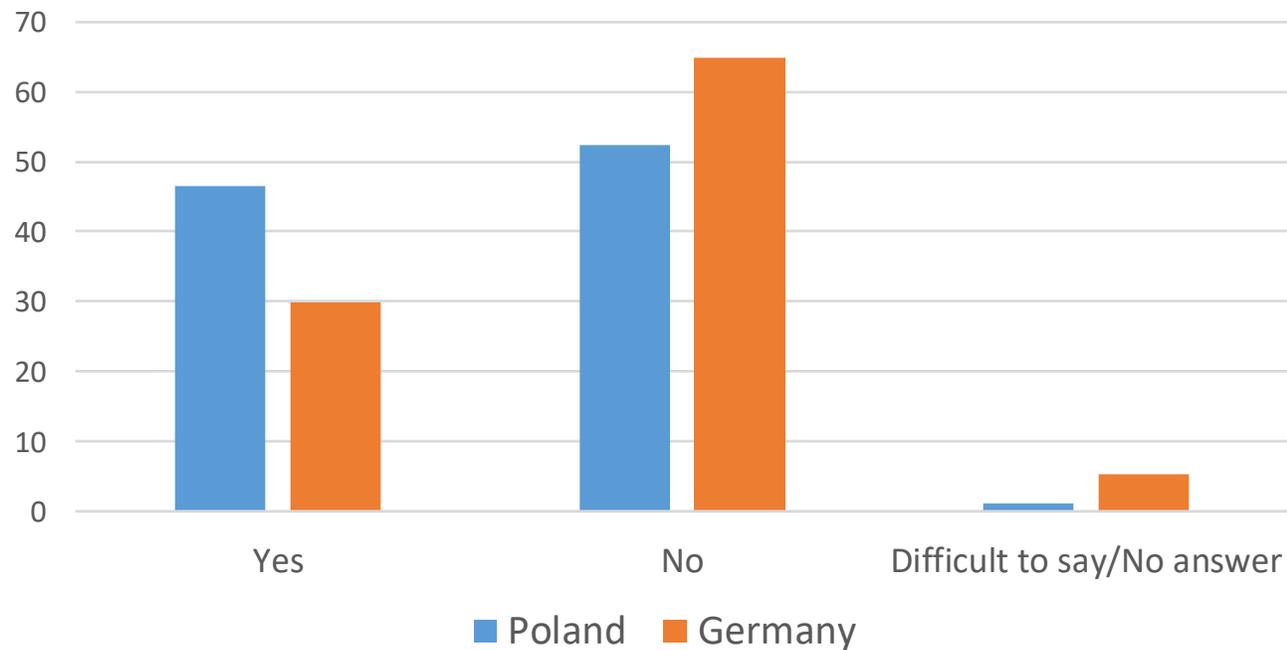
# Satisfaction with life - PREWORK CATI

Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are? (N=1000)



# Self-perception of working under precarious conditions

Would you consider yourself as someone who works under precarious conditions, i.e. someone who gets low pay and short-term contracts



	Poland		Germany	
	V-Cram.	Sign.	V-Cram	Sign.
Gender	0,139*	,000	0,075	,139
Age	0,147*	,000	0,087	,054
Education	0,158*	,000	0,202*	,000
Employment status	0,170*	,000	0,267*	,000

Source: PREWORK CATI surveys, N=1000, age 18-30

# Methodology

- **Biographical narrative interviews** (Schütze 1983) with the list of themes (in part III), the analysis with the classical GTM (Glaser&Strauss 1967)
- Non-standard employment, unemployed and in precarious forms of VET, as a general rule: 18-30 (but some cases <35)
- Poland: 45 cases in locations differentiated by labour market situation: Warsaw, Wrocław; Radom, Łódź; Międzyzlesie, Szydłowiec PLUS pilot study in Wrocław (2013 – 24 cases) (15 more cases to be carried out)
- Germany: 41 cases in locations differentiated by their economic and labour market situation: Berlin, Würzburg, Bremerhaven, Schwerin, Jena (19 more cases to be carried out)
- Additional context: CATI survey (18-30, representative for PL and DE)

# Construction of typology of coping strategies

- Much debate within & between PL and DE teams on core dimensions
  - The meaning (and, at times, irrelevance) of work as biographical concern (Fordist/Anti-Fordist/Post-Fordist; Integration/Self-realisation/Status)
  - The relationship between the world of work and world outside work
  - The mobility/stability between the types of activities / life strategies throughout individual biographies (and their reasons)
  - The importance of 1. types of capital (Bourdieu “plus”) (configurations, dynamics), 2. other resources and 3. reflexivity (communicative, meta-reflexivity, autonomous, fractured)
  - The normalization vs. problematization of precarity in the biographies
  - Self-world relationship (positive/negative; conflictuous/adaptive), self-efficiency, resonance.

# Precarious working-class type (proletarian)

- Role of work in life: *Clear division between world of work and outside/after work*
  - Typically fordist work environment
  - Distance to radical work flexibility
  - Autotelic/instrumental value: „my work is meaningful“ / „my work pays the bills“
  - Meaning of work: Social integration
  - Experience of disaffiliation / cultivated sociability (broad networks, family, neighborhoods)
- Attitude towards precarity: Longing for stability and/or precarity is temporary
- Coping strategies and mechanisms: Adaptive or Passive
  - Prior investment in cultural capital should pay off [Germany]
  - Normalisation of precarity as transitional OR Retreat into imagined communities OR local activism [Poland]
- Social mobility
  - Reproduction: transmitted poverty
  - Degradation: traditional workers' milieus or middle classes as result of individual or collective trajectories

- **Helena:** I'm left on my own. I work, return home, stay at home. It's normal, grey, monotonous (...) Unfortunately, this life totally kicks up your backside, it kicks up your backside. And, this life shows me that it's...it's not a fairy tale. That it's usually a battle. I mean, we, the people, are in a sort of, let's say, jungle. Everyone fights for survival (...) I had a choice: I could either go to the school and I wouldn't have things to wear, eat or, let's say, even top up a stupid mobile phone to be in touch with my close and further family, or I could go to work and I would be able to afford something. Yet, I work and I can't still afford anything. Because I work for little money and this is ungrateful job.
- **Mesut:** I think you can scrape by, now matter what you get, because you adjust yourself to it. (.) That you (.) can forgo some things maybe, that you don't really-, of course you have needs that you want to take care of, but there are things, that you don't need in reality, necessarily. So you need to see for yourself what is important to you and what eh-, less so. (.) For example for me a car would be super important, something that might not be as important for others, but the drive I have, otherwise I would have to get up an hour earlier. (.) I got a really small car, don't pay a lot of taxes, insurance is also extremely cheap. (2) that's totally enough for me.

# Precarious bureaucratic type (post-etatist)

- Role of work in life: Desire for a clear division between the world of work and outside/after work
  - Instrumental value of work: work as source of income, status, clean job, distinction
    - Longing for full time job in (bureaucracy/corporation)
    - Distance to radical flexibility
    - Individualism & aspirations of metropolitan middle class – clean work, ecology, high culture (vs. financial problems) / familiarism
    - Meaning of work: Status conservation
    - Intellectual aspirations - key role of cultural capital
- Attitude towards precarity: Precarity needs to be avoided, longing for maintaining stability
- Coping strategies and mechanisms: Adaptive or activated
  - On-going investment in objective cultural capital, constant adaptation of resources and capitalia to requirements of world of work
  - Belief in own agency, structural constraints are downplayed [Germany] – OR [Poland] „divergence of status factors“ as a potential of resistance and criticism [Poland]
- Social mobility
  - Stagnation
  - Incomplete advancement

- **Janina:** I got a job in a penitentiary in B-city where I still work, for 0,3 full time job. So, it's serious job [ironically] (...) But there was still something else at hand, anyway I have never been afraid of work. [I worked] in customer quality service by phone, in greengrocer's shop. (...) I cleaned toilets in the workshop, so to say. Mrs. psychologist took on an uniform and run with a rag to scour the toilets. But I didn't mind it at all, it was important to be busy and have money. Since the last year I also started to work half-time in the remand center in the W-city. Since then I'm travelling twice a week here and twice a week there (...) I still earn as little as when I worked in the bookshop but there is much bigger responsibility. I develop, fulfill myself in it but, still, I feel unsatisfied, really unsatisfied.
- **Anna:** I finished my degree in 2011. (.) And then there was- em- (.) yeah then it started with the internships. (.) Em- I shortly worked for the International Organization for Migration in (name of the city) in a project. (.) But that was only for three months, so that wasn't really so (.) so much em- and then I had the traineeship in the (European Institution) in the administration. (.) And em- (.) yeah after that I thought that actually- now you are actually well prepared for the world of work. And then also with- with good things in your CV somehow ((loud inhale)) (.) and then (.) was such a time where I was searching for a job for a long time. (Because) I then worked for a year for my father in the law office- he is a lawyer, worked in the office. Em- part time, but only, (.) well (.) it was e- just so you don't have a hole in your CV. (.) Ehm and I definitely did learn things and – but well that wasn't the desire to work in the secretaries office in the law firm with my Masters. (.) Ehm alright, so I did that for a year, and in that time I wrote applications and that was somehow a stupid time, because I then also got a lot of rejections and somehow I was thinking- (.) this can't- well this is stupid- this cant be it (.) (...) in between I did a short internship for the city in (name of the city). .... but that was more of a- (.) well it was also limited in time and i already knew tha- and that was before the (European Institution), I just had a few weeks to bridge, and then i thought, well before i don't do anything, I'll do I think six weeks there or so ...

# Precarious creative type (projectarian)

- Role of work in life: Blurred boundaries between world of work and non-work
  - Autotelic value of flexible work within projects
  - New spirit of capitalism / anti-Fordism (rejection of corporate & office work & small entrepreneurship)
  - Meaning of work: Self realization, authenticity
  - Awareness of biographical costs of precarious work
  - Co-opetition combining cooperation and competition
- Attitude towards precarity: Precarity is endured/tolerated, longing for authenticity in world of work
- Coping strategies and mechanisms: Creative
  - Creation of new spaces beyond employment, self-realisation is more important than immunisation against precarity
  - Precarity is redefined as enabling flexibility and freedom
  - Increase of (mostly incorporated) cultural capital
  - Strong belief in agency despite acknowledgement of structural constraints
  - Searching for new solidarities capable of reflecting the experience of instability
- Social mobility
  - Advancement
  - Reproduction

- **Michał:** I saw that it is really cool; that I prefer... I prefer to feel so creative; that it's not just sitting, doing your job, doing the same every day, shuffling papers from place to place. Erm... I just wanted to do something interesting, something that will somehow develop me. Because I realise that here I also did the same thing every day, but I did it for myself. Every time I could do it just differently, at different times.
- **Katarina:** I 'am definitely not a big fan of big companies. (2) That I would find myself much more-,(.) much better in the smaller. That's why I was happy, when I came to (city in Germany). I was like, okay 12 people that's good for me. (.) But on the end I feel like, (.) what I dream about, would be like five creative people organising projects. (.) And if it's possible in my, em-, utopian world in my Eden, to have that paid every month. ((laughing)) (.) So, would be a freelancer and all the time searching for the job, (.) but having a place and being able to perform with, ya.

# Precarious entrepreneurial type (bricolage)

- Role of work in life: (aspired) division of work and life outside work - disrupted through work intensification
  - Instrumental value of work – resourcefulness, anything goes / professional freelancing
  - Meaning of work: Status, economic position
  - Individualism at work, self-reliance, networks as resources
  - Acceptance and high value of flexibility
  - Individualism outside work / familiarism, withdrawal to private life
- Attitude towards precarity: Precarity is capitalized, longing for economic rewards and upward mobility
- Coping strategies and mechanisms: opportunistic
  - Looks for opportunities and invests in any capital from any sphere if profitable
  - Strong belief in agency in processing but not overcoming structural constraints (can be at the edge of legality)
  - Withdrawal to the private life or anti-systemic activism and tendency to “anarcho-capitalism” (the state as an enemy) (POLAND)
- Social Mobility
  - Advancement
  - In-betweenness

- **Pawel:** Well, such jobs that you can save something and so on, well then there is no such work. Unless you have a plan that you will work for the rest of your life for (...) but ... but I want to make a good money, and I know that I'm able to do it, I only need to put down my laziness and motivate myself. I know I'm able to earn that money. Damn it, I know I'm hard-working, I have some ideas. Maybe you know, a start-up one day? We'll see what life brings.
- **Pedro:** Finishing university, because that could bring security so I could find work more quickly. And eh (3) I'm looking for an idea for for a business ... That is also a plan, it is still a plan because it is not real yet until i get it. And eh finding a business that I can do with other people, because Air b'nb is actually going well .... Could be like buying an apartment, buying a piece, making a hostel, which is not so expensive anymore and is still affordable.

# Potential for other types in the material

- **Exit type:**

- Exit of the sphere of employment into passivity, NEET-zone
- Security in the world of work is not an option – uncertainty is permanent
- Weak relationship with the modes of reflexivity

- **Blocked/ paused types:**

- Experimenting with various life strategies or being stuck in undesirable one
- Moratorium zones, status passages
- Precarity can be either most pressing or it is seen as transitory (“stepping stone”)

# Resources for coping with precarity

- Social, cultural, economic **capital**
- **Criticism** of the political and economic system, seeing precarity as a structural problem
- Level of **immunization** against precariousness
  - **Emotional capital**
    - Affective experiences (feeling of being carried or thrown into the world)
    - (Compensation of lack of) emotional strength through social relations
    - Recognition on the level of love (Honneth)
  - **Biographical capital**
    - Perception of self as coherent
    - Handling of biographical cracks and crisis
    - Self efficacy and self-world-relationship

Crucial seems to be, what factor of structure can be activated for life project. It has to do with the type of reflexivity and the question, how structure and agency are intertwined and perceived (e.g. Archer 2003, 2007; Mrozowicki 2011)

On the biographical level, the most important issues of young precarious workers (aside from objective precarity) seems to be recognition and emotional capital as well as the establishment of biographical capital (e.g. Rosa 2017 and Seehaus/ Trappmann 2018)

# Conclusions

## Similarities in PL and GER

- Coping strategies rather passive/adaptive/activated or creative which is connected to rather limited collective mobilisation (in particular in Germany)
- limited criticism of precarious working conditions that would lead to political engagement or mobilization in unions (although there has been greater potential for it in PL than in GER)
- rather individualized coping strategies to structural problem of precarious work in GER as compared to greater potential for social criticism in Poland
- Reflexivity plays a huge role for coping strategies, need for further analysis how reflexivity types relate to coping strategies

## Differences in PL and GER

- PL more explicit class belonging expressed than in GER and greater potential for mobilisation (not necessarily work related)