

The moral aspects of class disaffiliation:
the experiences of intersecting inequalities in
the biographies of young precarious workers in
Poland and Germany

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Overview

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

Introduction

- The ongoing discussion on the **persistence of economic inequalities** and the (increasing) difficulties for individuals to identify themselves with social classes (Savage et al. 2015 ; Skeggs 1997; Ost 2015)
- The **case of young precarious workers in Poland and Germany:**
 - Precarity and the debate on social classes – does precarious employment lead to new class formations and identity? (e.g. Standing 2011; Hardy 2015; Wright 2016)
 - East-West differences in the experiences of precarity: PL /DE comparison
- How do class locations manifest themselves in biographical narrations in the context in which **class language is underdeveloped and/or devalued?**
- The relevance of **moral dimensions** of class identifications and disidentifications (Sennett and Cobbs 1973; Sayer 2005; 2008; Honneth 1981; Lamont 2000)

Theoretical inspirations (I)

- Class society as the space of cultural practices which “reproduce existing structures only through struggle, contestation and a partial penetration of those structures” (Willis 1978)
- Andrew Sayer (2005, 2008): the moral significance of class
 - The relevance of “**lay morality**” and emotions related to class positioning
 - Moral boundary drawing – denotes the way in which social groups distinguish themselves from others in terms of moral differences, claiming for themselves certain virtues which others are held to lack (Lamont 2000)
- Axel Honneth (1992): different abilities to articulate ideas of morality
 - Coherent, positive vs. Fragmented, negative
 - Cultural and institutional constraints
 - **awareness of injustice**

Theoretical inspirations (II)

- **Class disidentification:** the emergence of non-class labels (such as “ordinariness” (Savage et al. 2001) to “avoid the politics of being labelled in class terms”
- Skeggs (1997): working class women she studied “did not adjust to their social positioning”, but “rather they made strenuous efforts to deny, disidentify and dissimulate.”
- This, however, usually means (in case of working classes) only attempts to avoid “labelling” in terms which are seen as derogative and stigmatising
- The question of class identification and disidentification of young precarious workers In Poland and Germany

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)
- Germany: 40 cases in locations differentiated by their economic and labour market situation: Berlin, Würzburg, Bremerhaven, Schwerin, Jena
- Additional context: CATI survey (18-30, representative for PL and DE)

Tentative observations (I)

Avoiding moral judgements and boundaries

(DE) Denying and rejecting the idea and existence of a hierarchy: by ruling out any form of categorization or directly opposing concepts as strata or class – “there is no such thing” (Pedro); explicitly thinking of alternative ideas as “networks” (Sophia)

(PL) Dichotomic hierarchy – rich and poor „In this country there is total division, yyy, division of people. Or you are rich and you stick with the rich. Either you are poor and you hang with the poor, you are humiliated, because you are so, you are so.” (Helena)

(DE) Avoiding to use moral attributions: “how to say that in a nice way” (Marlen)

(DE) Naturalizing existing hierarchies: “This is, em-, this was like since beginning of the (2) the world. (.) Or since beginning (.) as human exist (3) ((laughing)). Well, what I think about it? I think about it as em-, (2) I think about it as a part of life. In a way. (.) I mean, I don't find poverty good thing. ... it's just, it seems to be natural for me. And, em-, (.) I don't see the world without it also. ... em-, like a food chain, you know. (.) A little bit. (2) It's also like of course, you feel sorry for, em-, (.) for the animal which is eaten by lion. (.) But it's nature in a way, right? It-, it makes sense. (.) And that's the way also how I see ((drawn out)), (3) yeah. (2)” (Katerina)

(PL) Criticizing existing hierarchies: „No, I do not think these chances are equal. You remember, I told you that when I came to Wroclaw I had such a big hit of a big city that I was a nice guy, and here I am nobody. And I'm not from a village like this, you know in the Bieszczady Mountains, I did not know 15 kilometers to the bus stop to get to school, I did not have so much fun in life so I had a chance to grow. There are people who were more difficult. And also in the studies, for example, I collided with people who were raised at a completely different level. Well I had such a little feeling of hurt” (Maja)

Tentative observations (II)

Germany: Idealizing and striving for the middle

Moral judgements about lower and upper classes are in line with the tendency of our young interviewees to position themselves in the middle

- In regard to morality the middle is **unsuspicious**; members being described as “those who work and get an average income (Sarah), “those who manage” and overall present “protected independence” (Tom)
- Emptiness! Unclear what makes middle aspirational
- **Moderation** a moral virtue in itself?
 - My parents are upper middle class .. They’re probably better off than the majority of people in Germany. And in the world anyway, of course ... but it’s not like my mum would go to do the groceries in a Porsche Cayenne.” (Markus)

Tentative observations (II)

Poland: problems with straightforward class identification: the problem is not the “lack of class language” but placing oneself in the structure

- „I am not in any kind of group” (Antek); “There is no one else like me” (Radek)
- **Externalisation** of class division: shifting to different time and place
 - „Such a division exists but in India” (Wojtek)
 - “[I belong to] an enchanted circle of poverty [laughing]. You know, I don’t like really to be pigeonholed and pigeonhole other, because I think it was done once in other systems [Ada]
- Some tendency to identify with middle class – in particular among those better educated and not active in collective interests associations
 - Middle class as those having “peaceful life” (Rafal), with “no pathology” (Piotr)

Tentative observations (III)

Drawing moral boundaries towards people in lower classes

Germany

Referring to abilities: “people who also have little but can not budget it.” (Robert)

“a majority of people have made life decisions that lead into such situation ... from my perspective this is to a certain degree due to one’s own fault.” (Markus)

Referring to motivation and aspiration against the backdrop of the meritocratic principle

„those who live of social benefits but do not want to change it“(Johanna)

Poland: the picture varies depending on resources and life strategies

Identification with the middle usually goes together with the **presentation of those on lower classes in more derogative terms:** being poor “at own request” (Agnieszka)

Some **solidarity with lower classes among left-wing “proletariat”**

In the case of those experiencing long-term **poverty and exclusion, the tendency to refuse unambiguous classification** dominates (sometimes combined with critical stance towards “pathologies”)

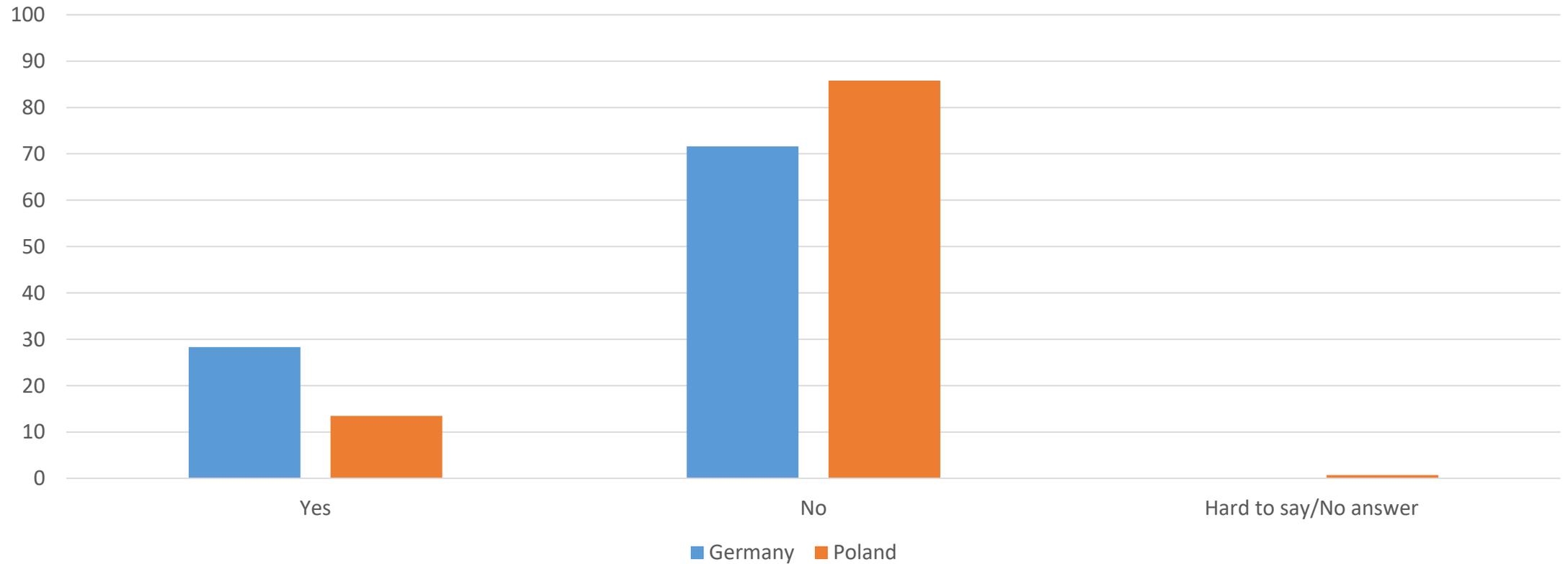
Przemek: “I think that I’m not the one to judge and there are no people lower than me. They can be, so to say, at the same level as me or they can be better, but I never thought that there is someone worst”

Tentative observations (IV)

- **Drawing moral boundaries towards people in upper classes**
- **Germany**
 - In reference to their wealth; aspirations, integrity and lack of moderation: “the rich, whose kids wear brand products” (Johanna); “There are probably also good people, but I prefer those who are honest and loyal.” (Manuela)
- **Poland**
 - Moralisation of class divisions: “insolence” (Antek), arrogance (Marek) of elites (mostly identified with political and economic spheres)
 - Connections and contacts (Norbert), “name” (Julita)
 - Conspicuous consumption – “life like from the movie” (Rafal)
 - **In limited number of cases: focus on merits and individual achievements:** “You can achieve almost everything thanks to hard work” (Wojtek)

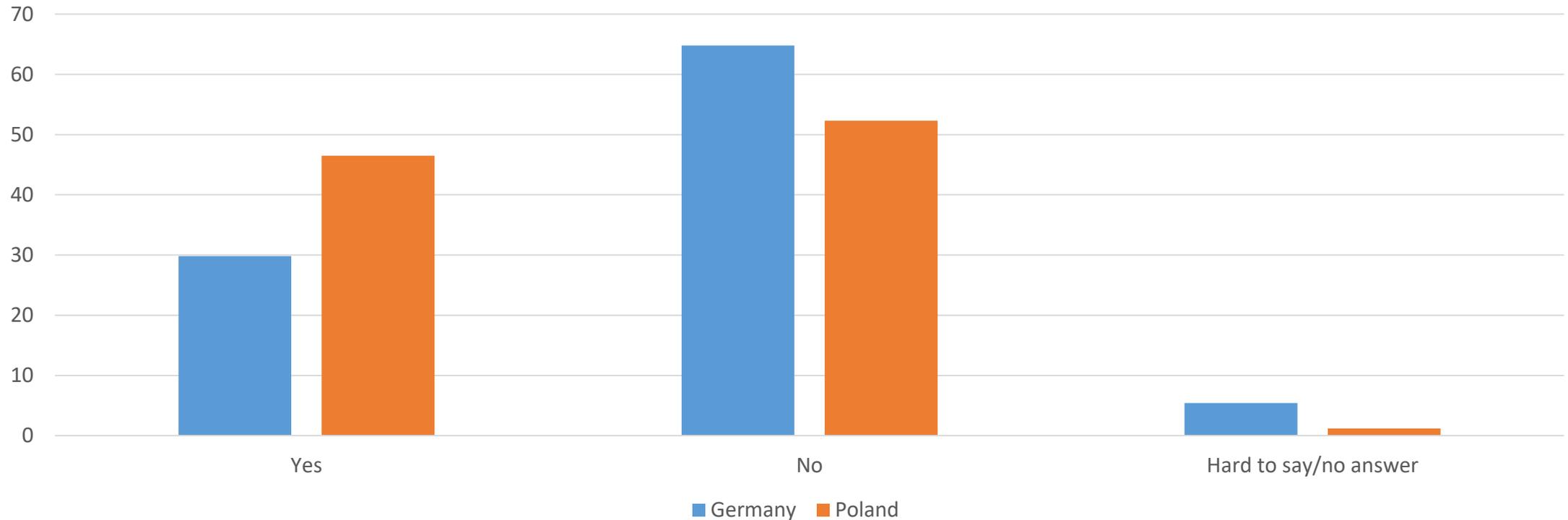
Identification with precariat

Have you ever heard of the term “Precariat”?



Working in precarious conditions

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



Tentative observations (VI)

Germany: Strategies to position oneself in the middle despite the precarious situation

- **Trivializing precarity**
- **framing it as part of the transition period** (ends when end of education, downwards mobility becomes obvious)
- Considering precarity **irrelevant** (postmaterialist)

➤ Political correctness and strategies of dealing with precarity – positioning themselves in the middle – **enable not to focus on unjustness of hierarchy** and specifically lower positions

“But I would position myself in the medium, because I-, I consider myself as a rich person. Because my experience about the-, (.) experience, which (.) and about my situation, that I (.) on the end of the day still stay t-, tall. And, you know, like make things going on.” (Katerina)

Tentative observations (VII)

- **Poland:** relativizing and questioning precarity
 - Individualisation: “everything depends on self-organisation” (Antek),
 - Transitory situation: “This is not work, this is just some extra job” (Norbert)
 - Adjustment: “You can get used to insecurity” (Ada)
 - Illusory character of rights related to permanent employment (Rafal)

Gaps and cracks in the “normalisation” of precarity in the narratives → potential for counter-movements

Marcin: It was probably after my third work in Warsaw that I decided that I should do something and I joined Together party. Unfortunately, due to the lack of time (...) I stay as passive member. But perhaps I will renew it one day. Because I’m not so much angry, but I imagine that this can be a movement in which something can be done. I mean, the party.

Conclusions

- Tendency to **avoid straightforward classifications** among young precarious workers – **as a mechanism of coping with precarious** (= often contradictory) **positions?**
- The **persistence of class experiences despite the weakness of class identities** – in particular, rather weak identifications with the precariat
- Important differences between Poland and Germany:
 - Much stronger tendency to identify with the middle in Germany
 - Greater diversity and heterogeneity of class identifications in Poland
 - Stronger potential for counter-movements in Poland due to “gaps and cracks” in the normalisation of precarity