

# Employment should be precious not precarious (Commentary on Seubert, Hopfgartner & Glaser)

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The term precarious employment so far seems to be a fuzzy concept, as it is used as a description of almost any kind of non-standard employment or for disadvantaged groups at the margins of the society. As a new variety of flexible working conditions is affecting almost everyone on the labor market, there is a clear need to refine the concept of precariousness. Research on flexible employment clearly suggests, that the subjective experience, especially whether current employment conditions match with individual preferences, and whether a certain job has been acquired voluntary or because one had no other choice are more important than an objective classification of different forms of employment (cf. Bernhard-Oettel, Rigotti, Clinton & de Jong, 2013; de Cuyper et al., 2008). Seubert, Hopfgartner and Glaser provide a great example for a fruitful interdisciplinary approach. Sociology and Psychology, albeit dealing partly with similar questions, are disciplinary siblings, which too often neglect each other, instead of providing mutual inspiration, and insights. The authors provide compelling theoretical arguments, as well as empirical evidence for the transformation of the sociologically coined term „precarity“ into a psychological construct. Borrowing from sociological concepts (Brinkmann et al., 2006; Dörre, 2005), the authors propose five facets of *subjective experiences of work-related precariousness* (SEWP): (1) *Reproductive-material dimension*, (2) *Social-communicative dimension*, (3) *Legal-institutional (participation) dimension*, (4) *Status and recognition dimension*, (5) *Meaningful-subject-related dimension*.

The authors follow a strict deductive (i.e., theory-driven) approach in formulating items along these five dimensions. They employ two scales, referring to the applicability and the perceived burden. Whereas this distinction seems conceptually sound, the empirical results do not indicate substantial differential effects. Hence, asking only for the applicability might be enough, but potential interaction effects of applicabil-

ity and burden could provide a deeper insight in the future. As a first attempt to establish construct validity, correlations of the sub-dimensions, as well as a global index of subjective experience of work-related precariousness with well-being, somatic complaints, organizational citizenship behavior, as well as deviant workplace behavior are reported. Overall, these first results are promising, as they indicate good psychometric qualities. As a next step, the unique contribution of the five dimensions (under control of all other dimension) by means of multivariate regression techniques should be tested, and reported. In the further development of the measurement instrument, it seems crucial establishing incremental validity above existing and similar constructs, as well as to provide evidence for divergent validity. By providing a reliable and valid instrument to measure *subjective experiences of work-related precariousness* (SEWP), the authors have set the fundament for future studies on effects of precarious employment. I very much hope to see longitudinal studies, looking at trajectories of precariousness across employment biographies, studies looking at external as well as personal resources, which might help to buffer detrimental effects of perceived precariousness, and last but not least the use of the measure in evaluations of job (re-)design projects.

## The concept of precarious employment

There is clearly an overlap of precariousness with concepts of poor „job quality“ (Burchell et al., 2014). Given the diversification of employment options, there is no „one size fits all“-approach in job design or job quality indicators. The classical models in work psychology focusing on task characteristics are appealing, but they are deficient in fully mapping job quality features of contemporary jobs. Besides of task characteristics (job content), legal (formal) conditions of the employment

contract (Seitz & Rigotti, 2018), the social-exchange process (Rigotti, 2009), along with the pace, frequency and magnitude of changes to one's job, and last but not least changes over the entire employment career (Haun & Rigotti, 2018), are gaining importance in comprehensively understanding the complex link of work with health, and well-being. Furthermore, educational background, qualification, skills and abilities as well as individual values and norms play an important role in the evaluation of jobs, and subsequent health outcomes (Gross et al., 2017). This hampers the comparison of job quality across occupations, branches, and even countries. Defining precariousness as a psychological construct, and thus a subjective experience, has the potential to enrich our understanding on what constitutes job quality, and allows for a more straightforward ranking among individuals. It will of course remain important to study the interplay of subjective experiences (along their antecedents, and correlates) and objective employment indicators.

As precarious working conditions can be seen as a significant adversity, studies on buffering effects of detrimental outcomes are needed. The concept of resilience has gained momentum in occupational health research (Britt, Shen, Sinclair, Grossman & Klieger, 2016). Resilience in the light of precarious employment should not only be studied from an individualistic perspective, rather we need to establish a social, and dynamic understanding of resilience. Precarious employment is not a distinct event, but usually a longer-lasting experience, likely leading to loss spirals over time (cf., Conservation of Resources Theory, Hobfoll, 1989). Modelling temporal dynamics of the subjective experience of work-related precariousness over short, as well as longer periods, as well as mixed method approaches (including objective measures of the employment situations, as well as objective health indicators) will likely be the most promising avenues to further our understanding, and to derive evidence-based practical implications.

### **On the role of work and organizational psychology for the future of work**

Santo Precario (also known as Santa Precaria in some regions) is a figure invented by Italian activists in their protests against the new precarization of employment. Inventing a saint indicates perceived helplessness. Although the modern labor market seems to promote self-determination, people also feel helplessly exposed to employment conditions. Instead of calling a patron saint, as scientists in the field of work and organizational psychology, we can rely on sound arguments, and well-grounded empirical evidence. As psychologists trained in probabilistic statistics, we often tend

to be vague in our practical recommendations, and we kind of fear normative statements. The recently published manifesto for the future of work and organizational psychology (Bal et al., 2019) is a noteworthy exception. Actually, there is a lot of solid evidence on how jobs, and employment conditions can be organized to help employees, organizations, and society to thrive, and promote their well-being. The academic discourse, and rigorous empirical testing is irreplaceable for a solid contribution – but it is not enough to make real-life changes. In order to reduce precariousness, we need to communicate outside academic journals, and train the next generation of leaders and managers in shaping precious employment.

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