

## **Extended abstract: Expert opinions on precarious employment in Flanders.**

### **Background**

Over the past decades the “standard employment contract” has been subjected to a process of degradation, including non-standard and more flexible forms of employment (Rubery & Grimshaw, 2003). Epidemiological evidence shows psychological and physical health complaints to be related with manifestations of precarious employment (Ferrie, Westerlund, Virtanen, Vahtera & Kivimaki, 2008; Virtanen, Kivimaki, Joensuu, Virtanen, Elovainio & Vahtera, 2005). Nevertheless, the measurement of employment conditions is underdeveloped. This paper is part of a larger research project where an alternative approach is adopted by developing a multidimensional measure of employment precariousness, based upon a power relations framework. As a point of departure it is assumed that precarious employment reflects a degradation of the traditional "Fordist standard employment relationship". In the traditional SER, the obvious power disequilibrium between employers and workers was corrected by a number of mechanisms such as collective benefits and rights, collective bargaining procedures and employment stability. When assessing the precariousness of a job, the SER can thus be seen as an ideal-typical point of reference (Rubery & Grimshaw, 2003; Scott-Marshall, 2005; Vives A.V., 2010). This way of qualifying non-standard and flexible employment conditions is becoming more popular. However, much disagreement remains about which dimensions of work and employment can be included in this precariousness-concept.

### **Objectives**

The first objective of this paper, is to reveal the dimensions of precarious employment in the Flemish labour market according to the experts. Furthermore, we reflect about the extent to which these expert views coincide with the concept and dimensions of employment precariousness that we postulated on the basis of theoretical arguments. The second objective of this research is to report on expert knowledge and views about how different dimensions of precarious employment become manifested in a “Continental European Welfare State”, like Belgium (more specific the Flemish labour market). This second objective aims to provide an answer on the actual meanings of dimensions of employment precariousness within the specific context of the Flemish labour market. More specifically we want to find out which categories of employees are confronted more often with aspects of precarious employment.

## **Methods**

Semi-structured interviews with experts from varying backgrounds, having relevant specific knowledge, were conducted using a topic-list. Thematic content analysis is applied to categorize the recurrent and common themes, using a coding tree that is inspired by the topic list. On the one hand, data are analyzed according to our pre-existing framework and knowledge on precarious employment, on the other hand, the content of the expert interviews is used to refine and contextualise our knowledge of precarious employment.

## **Intermediary results**

First of all, when speaking about precarious employment, the experts mentioned aspects related to employment conditions and relations. The following dimensions were cited: instability of employment, low income, limited training and development possibilities, workers' rights and benefits, formal collective bargaining procedures, unbalanced informal employment relations - vulnerability, and less favourable social relations at work. In addition, they also discussed aspects that are rather to be qualified as working conditions (physical and psychosocial), the task content, and the organisation of work (night work, irregular hours - flexibility, and shift work).

The experts also reflected on how the dimensions of precariousness are manifested in the Flemish labour market. Ten categories of workers are found in their discourses: temporary contract, temporary agency contract, subcontracting, posting (a posted worker is a worker who is employed in one EU Member State but sent by his employer on a temporary basis to carry out his work in another Member State<sup>1</sup>), informal work, part-time work, service voucher system, seasonal work, on-call work, and bogus self-employed work.

## **Temporary conclusions**

During analysing it became clear that precarious employment is a concept that is understood in very different manners. We found 5 perspectives in the experts' discourses. The first perspective can be called the instrumental perspective. For some, precarious employment is a merely legalist or contractual category, a general term for non-standard employment arrangements such as fixed-term contracts and temporary agency work. Some experts are also considering (low) income as a feature of precarious employment. From this perspective, only the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=471&langId=en>

objective contractual (and financial) situation is the key objective criterion to qualify employment situations as precarious, without taking issues related to broader employment conditions and private situational factors into account. Some experts within this instrumental perspective put precariousness to a background of health and safety issues. Here, the working conditions in itself aren't that important, but the training, experience, and the level of health and safety protection is important to define precarious employment. Supporters of this perspective argue that a job with less favourable working conditions (such as working with hazardous substances) is not precarious if it is done by someone who is used to this job and who gets appropriate safety protection. If the same job is done by a temporary worker who isn't trained for this and who doesn't get appropriate safety protection, it can be called precarious employment. Other experts are applying a more situational perspective, by accounting for family and living conditions, such as marital status. This perspective opposes the instrumental perspective: a temporary agency job can be precarious for a single mother, but isn't precarious for a young man who is still living with his parents. A third group adopts a more subjective perspective, by stressing feelings, meanings, worker preferences, etc. regarding the employment situation. Here precarious employment is defined from the meaning that is given to the work by the worker himself. The fourth perspective starts from the health consequences related to the employment situation. In this perspective the physical and mental health status related to a certain job is the main aspect to define the job as precarious.

Finally, we can conclude that the dimensions of the theoretical framework match well with the views of the experts when we look at the employment arrangements. However, hesitation can exist about the place of 'less favourable social relations at work' as a dimension of precarious employment. In the strict sense, 'less favourable relations at work' is an aspect of the employment relations. Although, it can be split up in two types of employment relations: the relation between workers (co-worker support) on the one hand, and the relation between employer/supervisor and employee (superior support) on the other hand. The first possibility, co-worker support, has nothing to do with the power imbalance between employer and employee which is the key issue of our conceptualisation of precarious employment. But to the extent that it refers to the relationship between worker and employer, it can be seen as belonging to the vulnerability-dimension of precarious employment. Moreover, we can ask ourselves if some other elements quoted by the experts must be included as dimensions of precariousness. It can be argued that some elements of the organisation of work (night work, irregular hours and shift work) are part of the employment conditions, since they can be found in the contract. Otherwise, these elements can be seen as aspects of the nature of work. In that

case, they belong rather to the task content. Further, flexibility can be seen as a dimension of the employment relations. In many cases flexibility is asked by the employers (e.g. schedule changes at short notice). If much flexibility is asked by the employer, and the employee is powerless to refuse the demanded flexibility or is not able to impose flexibility demands him/her self, this can be seen as an aspect of precariousness. The same reasoning can be applied for intensive working times and work pressure. These considerations are important to take into account for further conceptualising precarious employment.

## REFERENCES

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