NARRATIVE WORKS
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

Between Work and Nonwork: Precarious Transitions through Life Stories and Everyday Life

Annalisa Murgia
University of Trento

This paper analyzes critical transitions in work careers and the methodological implications with regard to the study of risk biographies. It analyzes contemporary work trajectories taking into account a variety of fields and spheres of life that are articulated in different ways, events, perceptions, and representations that inspire people's action. From a methodological perspective, the paper concentrates on the development and implementation of methods for the narrative analysis of biographical transitions. The criteria used for the risk biographies analysis assume that the actor is a sense-maker who thoughtfully and retrospectively interprets the shifts and the events of his/her life, defining their coherence with his/her own principles. Moreover, a narrative approach enables both a longitudinal analysis of the biographical transitions in life stories and the analysis of everyday transitions among paid work, unpaid work, and private life.

No longer and not yet: the portrayal of work and the accounts that it describes lie on a wrinkle in time that represents a transitional moment in the configuration and organization of the world of work. *No longer* because the monolithic image of work has now been exhausted, taking with it not only permanent positions for everyone within the same organization, but even the traditional biographical phases around which people structure their lives. *Not yet* because a new concept of work with which individuals can identify and around which they can construct biographical trajectories perceived as coherent and meaningful is struggling to emerge.

For these reasons, taking a position in the sociological debate on the transformation of contemporary work becomes a complicated undertaking. If, on the one hand, one takes the risk of pursuing a nostalgic analysis and resumes a work model that has progressively lost its centrality, on the other, the danger arises of constructing new interpretative schemes that claim to pigeonhole actual forms of work in excessively rigid classifications, often incapable of grasping the nuances and complexities of a process that is still ongoing and constantly changing.

This paper revolves around the phenomenon of nonstandard work characterized by a growing rate of precariousness that mainly regards employment instability but extends pervasively to other spheres of people's lives. It deals with research that I undertook in the province of Trento, an area in north-east Italy, in the public sector, where the participants were workers, formally self-employed, with nonstandard contracts, and termed "continuous and coordinated collaborations" (Muehlberger & Pasqua, 2006). I investigated the connections between undertaking atypical work and the construction of biographies. The temporality of work was thus examined not only in relation to the new types of contract and wage discontinuity but also, and especially, in regard to the challenge that they raise against the standardization of life cycles, as well as work practices and models (Barley & Kunda, 2004; Sennett, 1998). In other words, I attempted to answer diverse research questions, such as "What happens in the lives of people who work intermittently?" and "How do they move between work and nonwork?"

Biographical Transitions between Work and Nonwork

The changes in the world of work, which began to become widespread in Italy during the mid-1990s, at first involved the contractual dimension (for the purposes of this study, from the regulation of "continuous and coordinated collaborations" in 1995 to the more substantial reforms of 2003), but they almost immediately concerned more specifically social aspects, such as the articulation of the periods between employment and unemployment, everyday life, as well as free time and unpaid work, all areas affected not only by the unpredictability of work but also by the more general conditions of uncertainty, fragmentation, and a lack of rights. Amid the significant changes that have taken place in the labour market in recent decades, people with nonstandard jobs appear to be disadvantaged in many respects in almost all European countries, which exhibit marked imbalances based on asymmetries in treatment and forms of protection, albeit to different extents. In Italy, moreover, the growth of forms of nonstandard work and contingent hiring practices have changed the labour market hierarchy and widened the gap between weak and strong groups. Besides the significant differences between the northern and southern regions of Italy, the risks of precariousness reproduce and fuel the already significant phenomenon of generational and gender segmentation in the country (Barbieri & Scherer, 2009). At a time of an economic crisis that has hit nonstandard employment above all, not even a good level of education has provided a safety net: The decrease in atypical employment in 2009 affected not only

the less well educated, but also high-school diploma holders, and especially graduates, who represented 32% of the overall reduction in the number of nonstandard contracts (Istat, 2010).

With the intent of constructing a theoretical framework able to redefine the conceptual tools traditionally used to examine work trajectories, and to grasp how contemporary biographies are articulated, I will use the concept of "transition" as the interpretative keystone for the analysis of the biographies of men and women who work intermittently. Indeed, it is not only the world of work and its meanings that is in transit between *no longer* and *not yet*, but also the individuals who experience precariousness in their everyday lives.

Biographical transitions have been defined differently within different approaches and disciplines. In general, they are described as passages, more or less strongly normed and foreseeable, whereby individuals change position in time and/or space, modifying their actual identities and their social relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder, 1985).

There are various definitions of the concept of transition proposed in the literature, but they all refer to distinct trajectories and to various stages in a person's life span regulated by rules in the strict sense or by social conventions: "transitions to adulthood" from school to work, from cohabitation with parents to independent habitation (Stern & Wagner, 1998); work transitions (Mayer, 1997; Schmid, 2000); transitions from adulthood to old age (Maltby, de Vroom, Mirabile, & Øverbye, 2004).

These, therefore, are studies that have adopted a structural approach and have treated transition as a passage from one position to another. However, it is possible, in my opinion, to propose another, processual, approach, which focuses instead on how transition occurs and on what happens during the passage, and on how people cope with precariousness, especially in cases of transitions towards and within work uncertainty. These transitions are neither linear nor irreversible, and for people who experience them regularly it is not clear what subsequent work positions they will occupy. They are not necessarily unidirectional but proceed through continuous comings and goings, inversions, interruptions, turns, and resumptions. Hence the purpose of my research was to understand those who experience precariousness, the way in which they oscillate between periods of work and nonwork, their uncertain wait between employment and unemployment, and how they balance work and life.

From Work Precariousness to Social Precariousness

The approach that I propose for the analysis of contemporary forms of work in Italy highlights a number of dimensions and aspects that sociological analysis itself has helped to bring out and that have been overlooked or ignored by an interpretation that focuses mainly on legal, economic, and productive conditions. The interpretative lens provided by the *biographical transitions* approach, in fact, starts from the premise that the analysis of working can be conducted only by considering the multiple articulations of the different spheres that constitute people's lives, since "the organisation and distribution of labour can not be explained only by beginning from what is internal to the work itself" (Glucksmann, 2005, p. 22).

The sociology of work has to date considered the more structural elements of career pathways: selection mechanisms in the labour market, types and durations of contracts, salary levels, ascribed and acquired characteristics of the subjects involved in the phenomenon, and so on. Although this is a useful and necessary level of analysis, I believe that it is less suited to understanding the lived experiences and the perceptions that the storytellers themselves have about them. Studying the instability of work exclusively in terms of career paths and the structural processes of life-courses in fact reduces the experiences of individuals to models, thus losing their richness, complexity, and uniqueness. But the use of biographical transitions— rather than working careers—as the analytical category of reference makes it possible to move from the concept of "work precariousness" to that of "social precariousness," thereby extending the boundaries and meanings of work to include the sphere of sociality and practices that translate this sociality in its entirety (Bruni & Murgia, 2007). Embracing this perspective, in fact, enables account to be taken of other areas of life besides work, and it allows consideration of precariousness as a dimension that spans multiple aspects and redefines power relations (Thornley, Jefferys, & Appay, 2010).

To paraphrase Judith Butler (2004), the notion of "precariousness" expands to become "precarization." Whilst precariousness depends on characteristics specifically related to the labour market, precarization refers instead to a broader social phenomenon. "Labour and social life, production and reproduction cannot be separated anymore, and this leads to a more comprehensive definition of precarization: the uncertainty of all circumstances in the material and immaterial conditions of life of living labour under contemporary capitalism" (Frassanito Network, 2005).

Research Context and Methodology

The discussion that follows is based on research that I undertook in the province of Trento, an area of north-east Italy, in the public administration sector. The decision to concentrate on this sector was prompted primarily by the fact that, within the academic as well as the media and political debates, the areas that have received most attention with respect to nonstandard work have been those of private industry on a small, medium, or large scale. Thus overlooked has been the past and present role of the public services in the production of flexibility and precariousness, which have expanded considerably over the past ten years. Secondly, the public service is a sector in which women are markedly overrepresented and in which one of the most evident discriminations of the European labour market is clearly apparent: the high presence of women in the least qualified and remunerated positions (Conley, 2003; Fudge & Owens, 2006). The last reason for my choice of research field concerns the type of contract—for so-called "continuous and coordinated collaborations"—which is a self-employed contract, although most people (more than 90%) with this kind of employment relationship work only for one employer with a strong degree of subordination (Inps, 2009). Moreover, because they are self-employed, freelancers have access to a different social security regime and are not entitled to the same rights granted to other employees in terms of sickness and maternity leave, holidays, resignations, and so on. The proliferation of continuous and coordinated collaborations, which are sometimes protracted with repeated extensions over the years, also highlights the ease of circumventing the scant institutional regulation on the matter, with the risk of fuelling uncertainty in people's professional and personal plans. In 2007, the number of these employees—called "quasi-dependent"—increased by 5.5% compared with 2006, rising from 1.586 million units to 1.673 million. Considering solely collaboration contracts in the public administration, about 243,000 entries were recorded in 2007, of which 59% were women (Inps, 2009). In Trentino, the province where I conducted the research, there are approximately 7,000 "quasi-dependent workers," of whom more than 1,500 work in the public administration (Murgia, 2011).

The research results derive from analysis of 50 narrative interviews with men and women aged between 30 and 50 on contracts of this kind for different bodies, services, and institutions in Trentino's public service. The interview context was always decided by the interviewees, whose greatest concern was discretion and anonymity with respect to their colleagues and employers. The interviews were consequently undertaken in their homes, in public spaces (in parks

more than in bars), at the university, but never in their workplaces. The conversations—audio recorded and transcribed in their entirety—lasted approximately an hour and a half, with some exceptions ranging between forty minutes and two and a half hours.

Because I wanted to provide a processual reading of the transitions towards and within precariousness, beginning with the subjectivity of individuals in situations of risk and uncertainty, I adopted a narrative approach which made it possible to examine biographical stories and allowed the respondents themselves to define the boundaries and the relevance of their transitions and experiences. Hannah Arendt suggests that thoughts based on experience are necessarily articulated in stories (Young-Bruehl, 1977). Thus life and life stories are depicted as inextricably interconnected in a continuous manufacturing of sense and meanings (Brockmeier & Harré, 1997).

According to the narrative approach, transitions acquire meaning in the telling by weaving and sharing with someone one's own story, by creatively recomposing in a plot the fragmentation and the whirlwind of contemporary lives. The narration helps highlight the dimensions of the transitions, the passages that, for example, relate to the search for or the loss of work, the birth of a child, or the need to cope with a period of illness. They therefore represent one of the preferred instruments with which to describe and analyze how actors give meaning to changes in their lives and reconstruct the shattered order (McAdams, 1996).

Furthermore, a narrative analysis of risk transitions between work and nonwork allowed me to take account of both the respondents' entire biographies and the way in which people who work on nonstandard contracts organize their lives without fixed, day-to-day plans. For this reason, I adopted two different temporal perspectives: The first was chronological, and related to specific and "critical" moments in people's lives; the second concerned the "transits" of everyday life, where *transit* refers to the passage between different areas of life: paid and unpaid work, free time, and so on.

Precarious Transitions in Life Stories

When analyzing "biographical change" in life stories, an aspect needing particular attention is that of "turning points," that is to say, "the critical events that push a person to say 'I am no longer the same person'" (Strauss, 1959, p. 93). A *turning point* can be defined as an event that changes the direction of a person's life course so that s/he is different from what s/he was previously (Clausen, 1998; McAdams & Bowman, 2001; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich,

2001), those significant biographical experiences that occur during "interactional turning situations" (Denzin, 1989, p. 28).

There is ample agreement in the literature that the analysis of turning points should be based not on the "definitions generated by the researcher" (Bullis & Bach, 1989, p. 276) but rather on what the subjects identify as such. They are those moments to which the protagonist attributes crucial changes, or a particular meaning in the story to a belief, a conviction, or an opinion, thereby constructing the experience of the transition narratively.

The lack of full control (by the individual) over the transit conditions is due to diverse situations that may not in themselves be constrictive but become so if individuals find themselves having to harmonize them. This focuses the interest on how men and women deal with the transitions between work and nonwork and construct their biographies between episodes of training, in/activity, employment and unemployment, by attempting to combine the various fragments of their biographies.

The events and experiences that the intermittent workers interviewed identified as decisive in their life stories, exerting a negative or positive impact, were primarily tied to work transitions, and to particularly difficult moments, losses, or traumas caused by sudden and unexpected events.

Between the End of the old Job and the Beginning of the New One

The workers interviewed did not recount the beginning of a new job as a point of arrival, or as the end of a transition that only occurred once between two parts of the journey (the old and the new job) or between two states (unemployment and employment). In the lives of the narrators, biographical transitions took the form of processes that came about through a plurality of experiences in which the construction of a professional and life project was continually exposed to second thoughts, revisions, interruptions, and new departures. The biographies were thus characterized not only by a progressive individualization (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), but also by the intertwining of conditions, including training and work experiences and boundary situations.

One of the turning points that occurred most frequently in the accounts of my interviewees concerned the passage between the end of one job and the beginning of another. A crucial moment in the stories that I collected was the approach of a contract's expiry, which was described as a time when the perception of the employer's ambiguity and limited transparency increased and communication with the employer regarding possible renewal broke down.

> It basically happens that you go home for Christmas hoping that when you return you'll still have a job. Usually there are these magic interviews. One day they call you into this office, the two bosses, and they say they'll renew your contract for the next year and the conditions are usually not very negotiable, because they kind of always claim that there isn't any money. If in December, at Christmas, you still don't know anything, it probably means that they won't renew it, it usually works like that. I mean, because they don't tell you anything, your contract will expire at the end of the year and it's obvious that it won't be renewed. (28-year-old woman)

Stories like this evidence that the sense of uncertainty persists until the end of the contract. Moreover, it is interesting that the lack of communication between the employer and the temporary employee usually means that the employment relationship will not be extended or renewed. Consequently, besides considering the series of "new beginnings," it is perhaps more appropriate to highlight that individuals have to disentangle themselves, in a story with a succession of "ends" (Bauman, 2005), from deadlines and nonstandard employment relationships.

The entanglements and nuances between the period of work and the period of nonwork are most apparent in the moments that elapse between the expiry of a contract and the beginning of a new job, during periods of unemployment and the search for a new job. The notion of unemployment, which used to be clearly defined as the lack of a stable job, is today complex. The boundary between the employed and unemployed has thus become blurred by the advent of the entirely new category of "partially employed." For example, it may happen that in the public sector, where temporary workers are often permanent members of the organization —even if they continue to provide their professional services in a temporary way—the end and the beginning of their contracts follow one another without interruption. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the organization has decided to extend the contract; rather, that it has implicitly asked the temporary workers to continue working "on trust" even though a new employment relationship has not been stipulated.

> The general style is totally that of living day to day. You get to a month, but even less than a month, to ten days before expiry of your contract without knowing whether or not it will be renewed. For example . . . at the end of December the contract had to be re-signed before the first

of January, and you know when I signed it? Last week [the end of March]. So from the first of January until last week I was here without a contract . . . on trust. These are things that . . . that can create unpleasantness. (32-year-old man)

The emergence of increasingly undefined boundaries between work and nonwork and between employment and unemployment highlights the importance of adopting new approaches that are not interested solely in a macro perspective and analysis of the destandardization and deregulation of the labour market, but instead focus on the subjectivity of individuals, on their (work) experiences, and on how they perceive the risks connected to employment instability due to aspects of the contract or pay. In fact, it is appropriate to consider the stability that not only derives from a "permanent job" but is also associated with the perception of wages and the continuity of work experience, and which is expressed when not searching for work.

Periods of nonwork were identified by the interviewees as crucial phases in their personal biographies. The time that elapses between one job and another is a period during which occupational discontinuity and job insecurity have repercussions on the existential dimension, which is permeated by the anxiety of job searching and the impression of ever coming back to the beginning.

One experiences these periods with anxiety, because more than once, I will never forget it, I don't remember how many times "Yes yes yes yes!," two days before the contract: "Ah no!", or someone pushes in front of you, or something like that; so you're tense until you sign, and you could have used those periods for something else, from taking a holiday to doing a training course or some other thing. In fact you're immobilized by anxiety, because, oh god, yes, they told me yes, but you can't assume that if they tell you yes it will be yes, until you sign there is absolutely no guarantee and there won't be someone who has scruples in not renewing the contract to you. (37-year-old woman)

Times of unemployment are described as periods spent searching for a new job and waiting for news after incessant interviews, a *wait* that is in no way carried out passively, but is frenetic and busy in building one's own trajectory.

One of the new factors that produces specific inequalities between individuals concerns the control of one's time (Thompson,

1981) in the present, as much as in planning the future. In a "society of workers without work" (Arendt, 1958), despite the debate—with aspects that are sometimes utopian—between work time and liberated time (Gorz, 1988; Méda, 1995), it is often forgotten that in cases of forced unemployment, free time can take the form of a "tragic gift" (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, & Zeisel, 1933/1986), especially at a time of a strong increase in fixed-term contracts. This situation requires unemployed people to devote all their time to searching for other work, living compressed in a present fraught with anxiety about the future as they seek to give continuity to their biographies and to safeguard themselves against periods when they will be out of work.

"Forced Transitions" in Life Stories

Besides the passage from one job to another (on approaching the expiry of a contract, the innumerable beginnings of a new job and spells of unemployment), I identified another group of turning points repeatedly apparent in the interviews. I term them "forced transitions" in order to underline that they were unforeseen, and above all suffered, by the individual narrators (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). These were real moments of fracture in the biographies of the interviewees, who were subject to discrimination by their employers and who were not entitled to any form of protection owing to their lack of contractual rights.

One of the most significant turning points identified by the interviewees regarded periods of illness, which entailed immediate cessation of the employment relationship in the case of prolonged absence.

> I had a temporary job, then in April they called me from the hospital where I'd gone for a check-up, they told me that there was a place free if I wanted it. Because I needed to have a cartilage transplant and I was in dreadful pain I said "okay." And instead of paying me sickness benefits or keeping me on, they made me sign a letter of resignation, which is absolutely illogical, and above all, illegal. (41-year-old woman)

These were people who had been working for some time—some of them for more than ten years—within public bodies and institutions, and who at a certain point in their lives found themselves faced with a period of illness of several months. In these cases it seems that the relationship of trust and extensive relations with the same employer in no way made a situation of personal difficulty

tenable. Sometimes the administration waited until the end of the contract; in others it asked the worker to resign. But in none of the cases amongst the people I interviewed was there an extension of the contract or a tacit agreement on their rehiring on conclusion of the illness, or even access to the (even if limited) rights foreseen by the law, except in situations, such influenza or toothache, that could be resolved in a few days, with the briefest possible treatment.

Another critical event with heavy emotional impact in the stories of the workers was maternity, which is still not envisaged by "nonstandard" employment relationships.

> I had a child, my first child, and I worked until one in the morning on the day I gave birth, in the sense that I knew that I would go into hospital at seven in the morning because I'd come to term and I had to give birth, and I was compulsorily hospitalized. An hour, or a little more, after I had given birth, I told my partner what to tell the office the next day so that I could continue working. And as soon as I got home, I had five days of maternity leave, more or less working from home. I couldn't allow myself not to be there, I wasn't an employee, and so maternity leave was out of the question, and the following year I always struggled with work, and a very heavy burden, the exhaustion of total overload. (38-year-old woman)

Amongst the events cited by the interviewees as most critical for their work, maternity was a decisive turning point (Clausen, 1993), a "spectre" that loomed over the women's career prospects and life projects. By comparison, the masculine equivalent, paternity, does not seem to have been a professional obstacle and was not thematized in the men's accounts. Organizations have historically seen maternity as a condition that is absolutely private and personal (thus emptying it of all social value), and as a factor that impedes production because the absence of women creates an "unexpected" void that causes difficulties in the substitution or redistribution of tasks, and because the choice of maternity by women is considered a "betrayal" of the professional and working investment.

However, maternity is not the only form of discrimination that specifically affects women, who are still overrepresented in all forms of nonstandard work (Fudge & Owens, 2006). Female workers are often discriminated against not because of their life projects and their particular familial situation (having children and/or being married), but because of a prejudicial, or even discriminatory attitude of companies, in which a gender culture that discriminates between

people on the basis of their differently sexed bodies continues to prevail. An alarming aspect that emerged from my interviews with female workers concerned the hiring interview. In almost all of the women's stories the latter was presented as a moment of direct and explicit discrimination against them.

> Many workplaces, many interviews that I've done, in short, they ask if you are married, "Do you have children?" "No." "Do you intend to have any?" God, I hope so, that is, perhaps. It's logical, it's normal, that could be a disadvantage. Always, almost always, in the interviews. Of course they ask about your marital status, but in reality they want to know if you are married, and if you have children that's even better. Because if you have them, maybe if you have two or three it's good, um, maybe she's sorted, but if you don't the doubts come. (41-year-old woman)

If employers generally have a quite ample discretion with respect to hiring, these situations seem to be even more frequent in the case of temporary employment relationships. Recurrent in the narratives of the temporary female workers were descriptions of interviews with questions that did not relate to the job and were only put to women (about maternity, care, etc.). The lack of recognition of gender rights in the labour market therefore reproduces the structural and symbolic systems that place women in subordinate, more unstable and precarious positions.

Precarious Transitions in Everyday Life

The numerous Italian sociological studies on the transformations underway in the labour market have largely concentrated on occupational and professional aspects with strictly economic analysis or even one in terms of rights . But they have not considered the implications of the new forms of work for the organization of everyday life, the construction of one's private life, free time, and other spheres of interest, with the exception of some studies that concentrate on the theme of social vulnerability.

The flexibilization and deregulation of work, however, also come about through pressure on people to construct their "individual" everyday lives. This process takes place in a context characterized by a strong push towards deinstitutionalization, and specifically the precarization of work, so that everyday life is fraught with insecurities, contradictions, and unknowns. Whilst on the one hand,

one observes a dimension of routine and recursive time, on the other it is still essential to examine how ruptures and fragmentation occur in everyday life—aspects that allow visibility to be given not only to subjectivity but also to the institutions in which social organization and the culture of time take shape.

Transitions between Times of Everyday Work

One of the more radical and visible changes in contemporary work is the dismantling of time and work hours. Companies increasingly experiment with the chronological subdivisions that give rise to a working day formed of a mosaic of more individualized timetables. Nevertheless, the current tendency is not the reduction of work hours, but, on the contrary, their *intensification* and *densification* (Gallino, 2001). New jobs are often precarious and part-time, while many full-time jobs have disappeared. Alongside this phenomenon, situations of "super-work" still persist (Castel, 2002), and seem to multiply and become more frequent for those who work intermittently. In the Italian debate, those who work with "continuous and coordinated collaborations" are often placed side by side with so-called *work addicts* or *workaholics* (Ehrenreich, 2002): that is, workers who in most cases are (formally) autonomous and have extended working hours by choice or necessity.

> You struggle to keep everything together, to run after everything. You no longer see Saturdays, Sundays, nothing, truly you wake up too early and you go to sleep too late, your diary is always too full, really: "But when do you stop running?" This is the worst of situations, you can't say, "I'll finish this work and then I'll take a breather," no, you know full well that when you finish this thing there will be another, and when you finish that there will be another one again. (38-year-old woman)

> Often I find myself working outside working hours, that is, on Sundays or Saturdays, but I don't get paid, you understand? That is, I do it to get ahead with my work, I can't choose. In the last months of 2007 and the first months of 2008 we had a deadline for a project and we had to work every weekend for five months. I want to point out that my contract doesn't allow for overtime, no one pays me. And I even had the flu for four days and I had to work in bed because I had no alternative. (30-year-old woman)

The freedom of the interviewees to manage their work times was therefore very limited: They could decide not to work one day, but in periods of greater workload they might not have any free time for weeks. In fact, in these accounts, the narrators said that they often had to devote themselves intensely to their work, as contract expiries or delivery deadlines approached, and overrun the expected time, with an increase in work hours and rates.

Yet the everyday life of the workers interviewed was not characterized exclusively by *extra-ordinary* work—in terms of load and time—but also, in various cases, by the simultaneous undertaking of extra jobs that needed to be managed over the same day or week.

> Here the work is a bit too much, and so there are days that I go home at ten, at nine, you do twelve working hours, thirteen. But I have two types of days: days in which I work at [public body], days where I work at both [public body] and at school. I need to be at school at half past eight, I get the train from [town in the province of Trento], I go to [name of the school], I do my two, three, four hours, whatever there is, after the usual day I am here at [name] at eleven, half past eleven, ten, according to how many hours I do there. I get here, turn on the computer and start looking at the various requests. There are always three thousand things to do, I eat, start again, until I've finished. Then I take the train and come home, lastly I cook, then nothing, couch, bed. (30-year-old man)

For workers involved in unstable forms of work, imbalance is a constant feature of the working cycle. This signifies that the periods of underemployment occur alongside others of overemployment, often in complete disharmony with personal and/or family life. Such workers tend to accept even excessive workloads in order to avoid periods of unemployment and to increase relatively low, and also unstable, incomes.

Entanglements and Interferences between Work and Nonwork

Reflecting on the times of everyday life of men and women working on nonstandard contracts requires paying attention to the multiple and different practices that individuals enact day by day to articulate, in a more or less coherent manner, the different spheres of their lives. From the narratives of the people interviewed there emerged positive aspects regarding the possibility—allowed by the form of contract—to manage their days autonomously. Yet situations

in which there was autonomy in the management of working hours were very limited. The issue seemed to arise with greater salience above all due to the progressive expansion of work into other areas of life. Therefore, whilst the freedom to autonomously define working times and rates exists, in reality the constraints imposed by the employer entail a work organization with narrow margins of discretion.

The attempts and proposals to redefine the meaning and articulation of life periods and to reorganize the quotidian on new foundations concretely confronts (and clashes with) the diffusion of work conditions that increasingly trap one's work and existence. Precariousness and work uncertainty therefore tend to deprive people of the possibility to control the times of their lives and to produce fallout that profoundly affects that subjectivity.

> It's true that those who are flexible workers and who don't have a clock card are free to fetch their children from school, and go to the park on a Tuesday in June, but it is true that you know that after dinner you have to return to work. That is, not having fixed hours is real slavery. I always have this sensation of having to constantly keep going, to continually plod along. It's a very unpleasant situation, and so is the uncertainty due to the fact that you don't know when you should, when you can knock off work. (40-year-old man)

> It's impossible to keep work separate from the rest, in the sense that one influences the other. They are so close at the moment it is impossible for me to keep them separate. And until I can find some sort of stability, it's difficult for me to think about the private, about time for myself. In short, it's crazy because they are really intertwined, and unfortunately are increasingly so. (37-year-old woman)

Work time changes by exploding traditional distinctions and even confusing work with time for oneself. Everyday work hours now combine with other life times and they no longer take the form of alternatives to free time, especially in unstable occupations (Blossfeld & Drobnic, 2001; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Paugam & Russel, 2000).

In the daily transitions between work and nonwork, another area that acquired particular importance in the accounts of the fixed-term workers interviewed was unpaid work, essentially meaning domestic and care work. Unpaid work is generally absent from sociological definitions and from empirical studies of work, above all

because in the twentieth century work was synonymous with paid labour (Beechey, 1987; Bradley, 1989; Glucksmann, 1995, 2005; Pahl, 1988; Tancred, 1995). This reductionism can be seen as a legacy of the changes that took place during industrialization, with the progressive separation of the public and private spheres. As has already been shown for the biographical transitions in life stories, this dichotomy has from the beginning assumed connotations tied to the configuration of gender relations, constructing the public sphere of production as a specifically masculine sphere, while women were defined in relation to the private sphere of the family and reproduction even in everyday biographical transitions.

Although the passage from Fordism to post-Fordism has reconfigured the forms of the sexual division of work (McDowell, 1991;Walby, 1989), considerable differences between men and women still persist, above all regarding domestic and care work. From my interviews, in fact, there emerge accounts that continued to relegate women, working full-time or not, to the domestic and private sphere.

> And then there is a woman, she's a saint, who helps me at home once a week. Once a week for the general cleaning, and a few hours a week to iron, otherwise I couldn't cope. So yes, I'm privileged, I'm sure of that, but I need to say that we spend our money on these things, on household help. We take reasonably modest holidays, when we take them, often at the grandparents'. A few outings in the evening, if we eat out it is therefore economical, pizza, restaurants, taverns and of course not four-star ones, and therefore the extra expenses are somewhat reduced in this phase of our lives, by necessity, everything we save on cultural luxuries we invest in domestic help. (38-year-old woman)

> We are lucky that we live in the same building as my wife's mother and so she really helps us out. Also because my wife would have difficulties on her own, because even if she's part-time, she works many hours a day, but the fact that her mother lives in the same building, and her sister does so as well, there's this situation of an extended family during the week, and so we help one another out, see. (38-year-old man)

These narrative extracts show situations where the interviewees turned to external people in order to conciliate their

professional activity and their domestic work and care. Regarding tasks traditionally attributed to women and men, these accounts still do not seem to contrast what is taken for granted since women continue to think that it would be their duty in case there wasn't external help—"I couldn't cope"—and still persisting among the men is the dominant rhetoric that it is help for their partners—"my wife would have difficulties on her own."

Despite the decrease in gender segregation, both in the area of paid work and in domestic and familial work, it is evident that, at least in the last 30 years, there still persists a strong imbalance in the social aspects between men and women (Gherardi, 1995) whereby the former are more involved in paid work and the latter in the domestic and familial sphere.

Conclusions

The research that I have presented focused on the topic of precariousness, and in particular its contractual aspect—that is, nonstandard employment relationships—and the implications for diverse spheres of the lives of people affected by this increasingly common phenomenon.

This shift of attention from precariousness to precarization, and the dissolution of the boundaries between work and nonwork, have made it necessary to find new interpretative frameworks in light of categories that challenge a theoretical framework constructed exclusively on economic and structural determinants. The approach that I have introduced with this study uses the concept of biographical transitions to study transformations in the world of work, and in particular the ways in which these are faced by individuals. I believe, in fact, as argued above, that an analysis of work and working must necessarily consider the different articulations of the spheres that make up individuals' lives in continuous transit between work and nonwork. The construction of personal and working life-courses occurs in a context that is more open than in the past but also more uncertain and vague. Accordingly, transition can be read as a permanent condition that signals the plurality of passages that invest both working and personal (precarious) biographies.

Specifically, to take into account precariousness, I have dealt with biographical transitions by drawing a distinction between the different time dimensions of transition: *diachronic*—which regards the construction of the story through events that have occurred over the years (periods of employment and unemployment, coping with events like illness, maternity, etc.)—and the *transits* of everyday life

(passages between different spheres of quotidian life: paid and unpaid work, affects, free time, etc.).

One of the aspects that emerges strongly from the analysis of the interviews collected regards the gender implications of risk transitions, both in life stories and everyday life, described by the narrators. The fragments of the accounts presented reveal a situation where there persist—at various levels—dynamics of occupational gender segregation often more marked than in work characterized by greater stability and certainty. In this way, on the one hand precarization has reduced the differences between men and women, but on the other it has created new forms of subordination, because women still have to undertake unpaid work and work for the market, usually in situations of a progressive crisis of welfare.

The focus on accounts and on subjective experiences has therefore also enabled me to examine the institutional contexts that reflexively mediate biographical work (Holstein & Gubrium, 2007). The experiences that span the histories of individuals in fact lie not only on the trajectory of their lives, but also on those of the institutions that they encounter. In this case, the context evoked is that of a pressing demand for flexibility and, at the same time, of scant resources with which the welfare system manages, regulates, and protects the supply of flexible labour. The dangerous moments are those tied to biographical transitions corresponding to expected policy interventions, but which may instead leave portions of a person's life unprotected or not protected sufficiently (Heinz, 1996; Mayer & Müller, 1986). In fact, as pointed out by various contemporary sociologists (such as Beck, Giddens, Sennett, Bauman, and many others), current social and economic processes require individuals increasingly to deal with "precarious transitions," forcing them constantly to adjust their biographies: from work to the relational sphere.

In regard to prospects and areas for future research on this topic, I believe that the biographical approach could furnish "new maps of precarious transitions," even to policy-makers. Narratives have been gradually recognized as formidable tools with which to plan new policies (Chamberlayne, Bornat, & Wengraf, 2000), both for profiling users and for assessment. In the former case, the biographies of people enable the identification of needs extending beyond the a priori labelling as recipients of one intervention rather than another; in the latter case, evaluation of biographic impact makes it possible to support people in the realization of their life plans, and to ascertain the increasing individualization and personal consequences of uncertainty and precarization (Spanò, 2007).

Giving voice to individuals, collecting their accounts of their experiences in order to understand the complexity of the underlying processes, makes it possible to highlight the inequalities and the iniquities that emerge from narratives on how biographical transitions occur. To go back to the main argument of my research, I believe that labour and social policies targeted on disadvantages in the labour market, and social exclusion more generally, should pay attention not only to workers and their types of contract but also, and especially, to rights of citizenship that should be granted within and outside the labour market.

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Annalisa Murgia, PhD, is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento, Italy. She also holds a post-doctoral fellowship at Académie Universitaire Louvain, in Belgium; her project is entitled "Gender Differences in Early Post-PhD Employment: Flexible Stories between Academic and Personal Life."