

# Educational Problems and Their Importance in the Context of Young Poles Experiencing Precariousness<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The article focuses on exploring the relationship between experiencing educational problems in the course of life and precariousness in further professional career of young Poles. My primary interests are concentrated around the biographical experience in the spheres of education (especially in the context of young Polish workers undertaking studies) and work. I examine how the educational problems that were present at different educational levels may affect life stories and how they could be linked with the struggling on the labor market, and how they eventually led to increasing exposure toward precarious conditions as well as, finally, the potential of trajectory of suffering.

In the analysis, I am using biographical narrative interview conducted with Julian, a young precarious worker who failed to obtain a university degree. My main argumentation is that educational problems he had faced during his studies are in complex loop with his precarious situation on the labor market and led him to experience subsequent phases of the trajectory of suffering. On the other hand, I examine the role of the myth of university degree as a generational driver of upward class mobility.

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## Introduction

Apart from the shifts in political and economic areas, the transformation in Poland after 1989 also brought about changes in other spheres of social life. One phenomenon observed after 1989 was the growing importance of a university degree, which directly translated into a sharp increase in both the number of students and the creation of a new private sector of academic institutions (Moroń, 2016). On the one hand, it was supposed to meet the need for higher education itself as an autotelic value. However, it became an important factor of mass social and economic advancement, which was embodied by the belief in the significance of university degree and its impact on professional and financial success in the new neoliberal order of the Polish society. While the considerations of whether such a thesis was (and still is) provable are not the subject of the article, it is worth recalling the words of one of the social researchers dealing with this subject:

Achieving one of the highest enrolment rates in the world in 2010 (53.7%) was the result of the marketisation of higher education, the change in the structure of education at the secondary level (the domination of general secondary schools), and arousing young people's educational aspirations, and not an effect of intentional state policy (unless "vigorous market processes in higher education" were such a strategic goal) (Buchner-Jeziorska, 2011: 20).

I would like to highlight two important issues concerning the broader socio-economic context of this process. Firstly, after 1989, the Polish educational sector was characterized by one of the largest enrollment rates in the world (Moroń, 2016). Secondly, some of the key reasons for reaching such a high percentage of students involved arousing the educational aspirations of young people as an element to ensure professional success and considering studies as a way to extend the period before entering the labor market (which was affected by the unemployment crisis in first decades after the transformation). The other factors could be connected with low level of direct costs of studying in comparison with other educational systems (especially British and American) and a lesser significance of professional-oriented education, like in the case of Germany.

The perspective adopted in the article, on the one hand, develops the idea of university education as a promising path of personal and professional development (see, among others, the financial analysis of the rate of return on investment in higher education – Buchinsky, 2001; Adamczyk, Jarecki, 2008; Carneiro, Heckman, Vytlačil, 2011; McMahan, 2018; Carvajal, Popovici, 2020; Wu, Tang, 2020). Especially, the article of Adamczyk and Jarecki shows that even from the financial point of evaluation, obtaining university degree has significant impact on the rate of return of investment in education. These results reveal a similar pattern as in the case of the majority of educational systems across the world (Psacharopoulos, Patrinos, 2018).

On the other hand, my focus is on the opposite route, namely how going to university and failing this path can become a factor that intensifies the experience of exclusion. Such a research question seems to contradict common stereotype on the benefits of a university degree, but, as I will try to prove, it

can be confirmed empirically. Furthermore, its verification can show biographical “traps” linked with the belief about the necessity of studying, especially when, in the background, there is an individual struggle with social exclusion as a victim of the mechanisms of the precarization of work.

## Theoretical background and methodology of the study

Theories concerning precarity, work precarization, and the precarious conditions of work are reflected in various types of social research, although the list of the aforementioned notions itself indicates problems related to a clear description of these issues (Castel, Dörre, Bescherer, 2009; Mrozowicki, 2011; 2016; Urbański, 2014; Szarfenberg, 2016; Kalleberg, Vallas, 2017; Ikeler, 2019; Mrozowicki, Czarzasty, 2020; Stewart, Shanahan, Smith, 2020). In the article, I am mainly using the research framework and results of the research project PREWORK as an initiative concentrated on experiences of precarious workers who frequently struggled with their educational path.

I am using the distinction proposed by Judith Butler (2009: 25) between precariousness and precarity. The first concept refers simply to the human condition of being at risk of illness, disability, or death. In this perspective, social and political institutions are tasked with limiting the negative effects of precariousness. Their inefficiency and ineffectiveness mean that part of the population, e.g. specific social groups, are more exposed to experiencing precariousness and are, therefore, outside or on the periphery of the protection system. In this sense, precarity is an update of precariousness under conditions in which, speaking the language of Karl Polanyi, the radical expansion of market mechanisms deprives individuals and social groups of ‘the protective layer of culturally created institutions’ (Polanyi, 2001). The process of precarization is, therefore, intrinsically linked to the development of the neoliberal variety of capitalism (Castel, Dörre, Bescherer, 2009; Motakef, Wimbauer, 2019; Mrozowicki, Czarzasty, 2020).

One of the research questions I would like to answer is: what is the significance of educational problems in the context of experiencing precarity, especially when they occur at a late stage of the educational career? Considering the transformation of the Polish education as outlined in the introduction, the analysis of biographical consequences of educational problems can prove that the educational system plays an important role in the mechanisms of the precarization of individuals’ living conditions not only due to the fact that some percentage of students are not able to graduate and are made to choose different professional career path. In a broader context, the education system as an element of the social infrastructure is embedded in the construction of a collective belief in the need for higher education as a criterion for career success. As a result, any problem along the educational pathway brings with it serious biographical challenges that can lead to the emergence of suffering and loss of control over one’s own life.

On the other hand, prolonging education when there is high unemployment in the labor market (after 1989, it was only in 2008 that unemployment fell below 10% for the first time since 1991) could be both a strategy of investing in one’s chances and social position and a strategy of waiting, allowing people

to at least partially “hide” from the need to fight for a job (see Buchner-Jeziorska, 2011). In this way, an individual taking advantage of, among others, free access to higher education could implement a strategy of protecting and increasing one’s cultural and social capital, which would be used later. This, of course, was (and still is) possible under one important condition – the provision of the third type of capital (using the Bourdieu, 1985 division) – the financial one. However, what if the material resources are limited and do not allow a young person to cover all the costs of his or her life? The obvious answer involves entering the labor market.

At this point, however, we come to another problem that has already been signaled – the precarity of work. For young people, this was particularly intensive after 2001, when there was a rapid increase in the number of civil law contracts (Mrozowicki, 2016; Muszyński, 2019). Again, from a macro perspective, such a change in shaping the formal relationship between an employer and an employee can be assessed in two ways. On the one hand, a significant number of employees were not provided with a basic social security package that is part of the classic employment contract. On the other hand, it made the labor market more flexible and partly contributed to a slow decline in unemployment in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, when we shift the perspective from the macro to micro level and take into account the scale and nature of the problems that individuals and local communities have to deal with, we notice other types of risk generated by functioning on the insecure labor market, and they can be analyzed as biographical issues.

Regarding the methodological approach, I adopted a research perspective based on the autobiographical narrative interview method as one of the main theoretical and methodological frameworks of the qualitative component of the study (Schütze, Riemann, 1991; Schütze, 2008; 2014; Kaźmierska, 2016; Kaźmierska, Waniek, 2020). This method allowed me to track macro-social processes on a microscale of biographical experience. In other words, based on this type of material, I am able to trace and describe, among other things, the relations between an individual’s life story and the changes in the labor market. My main argumentation is that interconnections between one’s biography, educational experiences, and the characteristics of precarious work conditions have a significant impact on strengthening the potential of the trajectory of suffering.

According to Katarzyna Waniek (2016) and Fritz Schütze (2008), trajectory potential is the reservoir of disorder and suffering that an individual can (though does not necessarily have to) experience. At the moment of analyzing a biographical narrative interview, activating the trajectory potential can involve the emergence of a biographical process structure (the main principle that organizes an individual’s biography), the trajectory of suffering, the main characteristics of which are related to the interlocutor’s experience of losing control over his or her life, thus falling into biographical trauma and suffering. In this context, the experience of the precarity of work is connected with building up the trajectory potential. In the empirical case study, I will show how this aspect, related to educational problems (and other types of trajectory potentials acting in the background) translates into an individual falling into a biographical trap.

Within the mentioned research project, 123 interviews have been collected in Poland and Germany (63 and 60 interviews, respectively). In the article, I focus solely on the Polish part of the research and interviews collection. The study group consisted of people who were functioning in the labor market within non-standard forms of employment, were unemployed, or were undergoing internships/apprenticeships. The age of the respondents ranged between 18–35, and the geographical scope of the project covered the Mazovian and Lower Silesian voivodeships. While the area of topics covered by the research is broad, there are still some threads worth investigating in depth. One of them is the interrelation between educational problems and the experiences of precariousness that young workers adopt. To analyze them in depth, I have decided to focus on one autobiographical narrative interview with Julian, whom I will introduce more specifically later.

As a result of the analysis of the interviews collection, it turned out that a significant number of the narratives contain traces of various types of situations that could be classified as experiences of educational problems. These included circumstances which the individuals had to deal with at different stages of their school career, starting with the “bad pupil” label, stopping in education due to problems with completing school or a course of study, problems with promotion from year to year, as well as breaks in later educational career, followed (or not) by a return to the original course of education.

At this point, I would like to use the concept of emic and etic categories (Pike, 1967; Kaźmierska, 2019). Emic categories are introduced by the narrators themselves, as a reference to their experiences. Etic categories are imposed on the narrators, who use them to describe themselves in their life stories. They can come from external sources (e.g. public debates, the media, political discourse). The education-related labels mentioned above can be clearly categorized as emic statements in contrast to terms such as precariousness or precarious work, which, as academic-based terms, would be classified as etic. However, one of my points of interest here is how we can combine the emic and etic perspectives in the analysis of the collected material.

Bearing in mind the aim of organizing and categorizing the cases, the types of educational problems will be divided into three categories based on the criterion of the level of education at which they appeared:

- 1) early education – problems appear at the first or second level of education and include problems with learning, an inability to establish social ties with peers, and sometimes being excluded from class;
- 2) interrupted/broken rhythm of transition – related to problems with passing the secondary school exit exam; it is connected with blocking the transition to the next stage of education (studies), choosing a different course of study than planned, or sometimes it proves to be a factor that influences starting employment;
- 3) changes in the course of studies (changes of courses of study) or interruption of studies – a key category from the point of view of the article, in some cases related to the experience of precarious work.

The number of interviews that could qualify for the first category was nineteen, the second group included seven narratives, and the third one – nineteen narratives, too. Due to the issue of experiencing precarious work, which becomes a problem in adulthood, I focused on the third type of educational problems.

Out of this group of interviews, I decided to focus on one case in particular and attempt to show the complicated relationship between precariousness, educational problems, and the impact of family and class background. The analytical part of the text will contain a detailed description of the interviewee's life history and an analysis of the interview in the context of the topic I am interested in. However, I would like to emphasize here the complexity of the selected case, which illustrates the complicated relations, tensions, and processes embedded in the individual's biographical experience. For this reason, I will follow the guidelines for the analysis of biographical narrative interviews (Riemann, 2003; Treichel, Schwelling, 2003; Kaźmierska, 2016; Kaźmierska, Waniek, 2020).

### The case of Julian

For the empirical analysis, I chose the case of Julian, a library worker in a medium-sized town in central Poland. The main reason to present a case study based on this biography was the ambiguity of the struggle associated with education and its interrelations with precarious work that the interlocutor experienced (to see a similar analysis, check Gaupp, 2013). On the one hand – and again referring to the concepts proposed in Schütze's works – it is clear how the desire to achieve educational goals (including, above all, higher education) became the basis for Julian's biographical action plan (Schütze, 2008). On the other hand, the desire for higher education was one of the elements of the biographical trap created by, among other things, the pressures and tensions associated with functioning in the precarious labor market. Before I describe how Julian fell into this trap, I will briefly outline his life story.

Julian's biography focuses on his hometown. He has spent most of his life there and still lives there during the interview. His parents and grandparents also came from this area. He has three siblings – a twin brother, an older brother, and a sister. Julian's father is a former military professional. He had a fairly long history of working in military plants in his hometown, which were closed down in the 1990s. This was one of the reasons why Julian's family experienced great financial hardship while he grew up and later during his studies. In the interview itself, the figures of his mother and older brother practically did not appear; the sister was mentioned once, and it is his twin brother who appeared most often.

An important thread was Julian's illness. He was born with mild cerebral palsy (the diagnosis was made at the age of five). He had an assigned disability category and cannot perform physical work till today. In the first, narrative part of the interview, the story of illness was mentioned in the background, but in the second, questioning part, he indicated the need for constant rehabilitation. Julian's

treatment (and that of his twin brother) was presented as one of the reasons for the family's poor financial situation during his adolescence. It had an indirect impact on his opportunity to study and forced him to start working.

In the interview, Julian said little about education in primary and secondary school. He stressed that he suffered from dyslexia, the negative impact of which has been greatly reduced because of his individual efforts. Regarding the education path, the main attention was paid to struggles with the university level. Additionally, in the second part of the interview, he mentioned applying to a clerical school after secondary school. He wanted to become a missionary, but was rejected during the recruitment process. In his opinion, the reason for not accepting him was probably his health condition.

His siblings went to university (the older brother is a surveyor; the sister studies graphics; and his twin brother is a historian). Julian attempted studies twice. First, he applied for a B.A. in the humanities in S., i.e. a smaller town in southern Poland, then he moved to T., i.e. one of the biggest cities in the country, abandoning both attempts due to serious financial problems. In February 2017, he returned to live with his parents in their family home. Problems with finding and maintaining a job during his studies drove Julian into serious debt.

The narrative itself is looped. Julian began his story by talking about his work experience and returned to this thread many times. The main axis of the first narrative was the negative experience with the local labor market. He talked about how, while working in a public institution, he was deceived by a district governor and given the so-called "wolf ticket" in his hometown. According to him, this "revenge" also affected his twin brother. Additionally, the experience of working for private companies was not positive either, e.g. he ended up leaving a doorman's job due to the employer's failure to meet the employment conditions arranged with Julian before he started working. These stories were accompanied by broad argumentations and theoretical comments on the issue of work and its role in human life. The work-related problems led Julian to depression, psychiatric help, and the statement that he suffered from recurring depression for social reasons. After a nervous breakdown on his final return home from university, he managed to find a job in a medium-sized town near his hometown. He works in a library, where he is involved in promotion. Julian earned 2,000 PLN (approx. 430 EUR) gross a month at the time of the interview.

## The analytical findings

I will start the analysis with a quote in which Julian describes his childhood:

Julian: So what? Well, I just remember, uh, it was hard. What a lot to talk about. I also remember a picture, I don't know, I'm pretty sentimental, I remember things like that I remember things like that when, well, we were kids, and mum brought juice and diluted it with water, so there were enough glasses for everyone, yeah, uh, and she said about it, and then she wondered that,

uh, there's something wrong, like dad's already working, but something's wrong. And, uh, there were a few pictures like that when we were all looking for change in our jacket pockets to buy cream for soup or bread. Well, these are the images you remember, unfortunately. Uh, although I also remember three plentiful years, because when we got out of the way, my father's great dream was, of course, to provide his children with a solid education, all the more so because my father didn't have the opportunity to get an education, and I know that he's still living it, yes. He's 60 years old, but he's still going through it today. And a great dream for him, especially for mum, that we should receive a solid education, also, we don't know: to have fun and learn. Every weekend we used to go somewhere, get to know the area, visit monuments in the area, go hiking, although not biking because I can't ride a bike, the whole family suffers because of this. But anyway, there was a lot more and more of it, brother I remember learning to play the piano, I also tried something there. Uh, anyway, they were, they were my parents' priorities. Health and investing in kids, so they get to know the world. That's why my father always said that he wanted us to get to know the world, because he knew that knowing various strange, funny, cool attractions, places, you can just manage later, yes, they always did it very well.

In the first part of the quote, Julian refers to the 1990s, when the family experienced extreme poverty. The situation was so complicated that the health problems of Julian and his twin brother overlapped. After recalling the story about the juice and looking for change, he moves smoothly to a better (at least financially) period, in which his parents' actions aimed at building their children's cultural capital played the key role. However, we can take a critical look at the way Julian's parents chose to achieve this goal. Here, he recalls trips the family made in the local area, for educational purposes, among other things. There were also piano lessons for him and his brother. Despite Julian's positive assessment of himself, however, we can wonder about such a choice of additional classes, which, in fact, did not prepare him sufficiently for his later struggles with university-level education (here, for example, we can mention his accounts that relate to the need to catch up with the knowledge of foreign languages in another part of the interview).

Julian's emphasis on his father's lack of education and his parents' pressure to gain one as an important value in life was reflected in Julian's later decisions, which led to a biographical action plan in which the need to obtain a university degree played a central role. What is more, in this case, we can talk about the autotelic nature of education, which would make the interlocutor's attitude different from the approach that values studying as an investment in future professional careers. On the other hand, the parents' lack of education may have been the reason why Julian was not able to build upon their experience a sufficient knowledge base of what he would need in his struggle with studying.

However, a much more important problem that Julian had to deal with during his studies was the need to obtain funds for living after moving to S. and then T. It is worth noting again that he presents the chronology of events in an unclear way, interweaving different stages of studying and working.



Julian: The very fact that where I've tried, I've tried, that's the best term, to study. I've taken up studies, I've thrown it away many times, and I've gone back to it, but, I think I should go back to it someday, but on terms that I can afford because, let's be honest, full-time studies, you don't pay for the tuition, but, well, everybody knows that life costs money. That my family has never had any special savings, also, there were a lot of us at home, also, also, these savings are quickly over and you are studying in a completely different way with the awareness of that the financial support of the family will be, and, and it is different, the comfort of work, studying, when you have your back against the wall, that no-one will ever save money and you have to earn a scholarship. This is the kind of mobilization that paralyzes me, mobilization, the necessity for me is paralyzing, because I myself, it seems to me, I got used to the kind of moods that I have often heard from my peers, that necessity is/it is not necessarily what you want to do with yourself, not necessarily, but just thinking about living, earning money, and it turns out to be a big flop because my peers are more bitter, tired than I am many of them are bitter, tired and you can see it in such an approach, like man to man, where there is more of some kind of mocking behavior and such things. And well, I didn't want it to affect me and them too, and that's why I stubbornly tried to look for a form of income that wouldn't necessarily be well paid, but somehow striking, touching my interests.

In the quote, we can observe how Julian, commenting on his own experiences and plans, goes on to evaluate the collective relationships and feelings he notices among his peers. Moreover, the argument he presents reconstructs the complex impasse he was in (and, to some extent, still is in, if we assume that, according to his declaration, he will want to go back to university) when he decided to go to university. The lack of financial resources on the part of his parents forced him to try to find work. When looking for a job, Julian focused more on his interests and passions, putting less emphasis on the amount of earnings. This non-materialistic approach is a characteristic feature of the whole interview with Julian, but it is not enough for him to explain and work through the dissatisfaction with the situations when low-paid jobs turned out to be cases of exploitation or extortion. This happened several times when he was looking for a job in his hometown:

Julian: And then, and then, more or less at that time, my dissatisfaction with life appeared, in general, total, because on the one hand, I knew that what I was doing for a living was a certain stage that would give me social independence, a start that would allow me to become independent, to complete my studies and so on, and, in consequence, to do something that I consider my vocation. But when I found out that the conditions were not what we had agreed on and that I was meeting such employers more and more often, it occurred to me that this is a stupid, maybe ugly term, a shitty asshole, because I'm spending my time here, against myself, contrary to my dreams, in the hope that I will accumulate the capital that will later allow me to realize them, and here it is, but not only that I am forced to do – I call it forced labor, it does not even give the effect that I imagined also.

Continual negative experiences, whether with deceitful employers or with other forms of pressure and exploitation, caused Julian's increasing dissatisfaction, and, consequently – in terms of biographical analysis – triggered a trajectory potential that was “stimulated” by the difficulties in achieving the financial security to implement the biographical action plan associated with going to university and gaining higher education. Additionally, at the beginning of his studies, Julian's choice of course and university was economically irrational. The irrationality here lies in the arbitrary choice of place to study. Julian and his siblings chose universities in different cities, making the cost of living for the four children too high for their parents. We clearly see here the work of the family habitus (Bourdieu, 1985) “commanding” the interlocutor to choose a path based on his passion and not economic logic. Corrective actions that involved moving in with his brother did not bring the expected result. We can assume that due to the objective circumstances (indebtedness) and the subjective factor (falling into the trajectory and losing control of the course of his life), Julian was no longer able to escape a biographical trap:

Julian: My parents had some savings; I also started studying with my brother; my sister was still studying then. Uh, she's three years older, almost four. She was still studying. But that didn't prevent my parents from making it a priority to support us so that we could start studying, and it wasn't on my parents' orders: you're supposed to be a lawyer, a doctor, an engineer, an architect, uh, just on the basis of knowing us, our interests, our plans, we just could, we had the opportunity to choose and go our separate ways. My brother remembers, then he started studying history in T. My sister then studied geodesy in W. [middle-sized city in northern Poland], and I went to S. It wasn't economical either.. You could have said: there are no such tales. I rent you a flat in T, you all study there, for example, or in W.. And so it was like this. Admittedly, I later thought about moving in with my brother, but it was also too late to take any rational action because it was when my back was already against the wall, when the money had run out. Also, uh, there wasn't much to move with, either.

The following quote sheds some more light on Julian's struggle to study and combine it with his work:

Julian: Also, yes. Uh, the truth is also that I was consumed with ambition, and I couldn't reconcile paid work, forced work, with studies, because where is that? And I, I, I didn't quite understand it. All the more so because I know/ all the more so that I wasn't used to such prevention. Because I remember some problems there, or financial problems of my parents because we simply lived a modest life, but my parents never made a fuss about it. Uh, some pride, some care for the kids, but they didn't make an issue out of it. I wasn't prepared for the fact that money could run out, that you have to go to work, that you have to think about your career in perspective, but also more broadly, just more thoroughly.

In this statement, we can observe again how Julian uses static descriptions of the contexts of his actions and argumentation schemes to justify decisions made (or not made) in the past (Schütze, 2008). The predominance of these two types of communication patterns over narrative structures is

a characteristic feature of the interview and it may be a consequence of his earlier therapeutic experiences, which somehow lowered the improvisation effect of the story of his own biography that is characteristic of this method. However, it is still worth tracing how he explains his actions and outlines his attitude toward what happened to him.

Here, I would like to draw attention to the issue of Julian's "unpreparedness" for "adult" life. It seems as if he was going to study without realizing that he would have to live in another city. The next attempt is better planned, but, unfortunately, it again ends in failure:

Julian: Later, I laugh, I emigrated because I took up studies again. I left for T.; there, I also made money as a janitor. I was making money there, and I cooperated with the National Museum; it wasn't a lot of money, neither here nor there. They never gave the security that a certain amount of money would come in every month, only that it depended on many factors. I still had to reconcile this working time with showing up at classes, or at least enough of them that was still within the regulations. Well, that wasn't comfortable either, of course, but then I realized that I was able to sacrifice my comfort. I took it as my emigration, and so I explained to myself that, uh, I have a goal here, yeah, and I am able to agree to do more, despite some of my unpleasant experiences. Uh, and I also often worked without a contract, also/not always got paid. Also, back then, I didn't really look at the future, or securing myself, despite this – I wonder myself today – mm, why I was inclined to such conditions despite the fact that I remembered well how I had been screwed, I wasn't, also I wasn't open, and I didn't say 'No contract, I won't do it,' but I should have. Well, in myself it's like that, so I found out why I had agreed to such terms – the hope to work [nervous laugh], they say, they say: hope to mother the foolish, and the brave lover.

Julian took on more work. First as a janitor, then with the National Museum. He stressed the lack of security, pointing out that he worked not only under civil-law contracts (the so-called junk contracts), but also without a contract. Again, his imperative was to remain at university, but not in the sense of studying or grades. His motivation was primarily economic. At the same time, again, Julian was not doing well, for which he blames himself. However, it was not Julian's last attempt:

Julian: Also, mmm, and these are the charms, that somewhere at the back of my head there hangs this experience even when I went to T. again worked there, I was afraid to take up work. It may sound funny, but I was afraid to go to an interview. Uh, I didn't believe it made sense [nervous laugh]. I thought it was a waste of time. Maybe that a stupid loser thing came up again, then with hindsight, it could be diagnosed, a recurrence of depression. It was later diagnosed as recurring depression based on social phenomena [nervous laughter]. It's funny for me, today, now, but actually, I've been through quite a traumatic experience of social security. At some point, because in February, when I had already accumulated so many commitments that I wasn't able to repay them, and I wasn't able to borrow anything from anyone anymore, including short-term loans, shadow banks and others [nervous laughter], I just packed up, came home, and thought to myself: somehow it will be ok. And [sighing] for half a month, I didn't leave home, I couldn't find

a job, I couldn't take up a job, I couldn't fight the job market, that's what I call it [nervous laughter]. No, I couldn't go out and just ask for a job, I couldn't, something uh something paralyzed me. I know it can suck, it can be lame, that's what they say, but there was something about me that didn't let me do it.

At this point, I would like to underline that Julian is reporting directly on the situation of losing control over his own life and suffering, which indicates falling into a trajectory trap. We can see how it is only the information (a diagnosis) he receives from the outside, from an "objective" authority, that allows him to break the recurring pattern – the decision to go to university and try to stay there. However, this is not an event that can protect Julian from further consequences of falling into the trap of trajectory – returning home and falling into apathy.

Julian: At one point, I got on the bus, went to [middle-sized city near to his hometown], printed out some of my CVs beforehand, and sent them out to various institutions I thought were working there, in a similar way, where I could use just some of my skills. [Sighs] Now I'm employed in the promotion department of the library in [middle-sized city near to his hometown]. I wouldn't get a job in [Julian's hometown]. Not me. I'm sure of it. I'm sure of it. I have a twin brother. He's been looking for work here for two years. He's gone all over town, where, where, where anything, whoever he saw, whoever he knows he didn't get a job, despite it all; he doesn't despise it, he just takes anything. I didn't know there was no place here. And I also realise that some of my misunderstanding with the district governor may have contributed to this. Later on, I realised that the district governor in Poland has a lot of prerogatives that influence the whole local politics because it is not only the local government policy but the realization of many government tasks. In these regions, [Julian's hometown] [...] especially in the backwoods of the province, especially since the county is such an unwanted, unnecessary creation [nervous laughter]. Yes, that's how it feels, because there are no investments here because if there are any, it's the EU. Well, the road is governmental, but this is more a matter of connecting Warsaw with T.. Nothing else. [pulls out a cigarette]. Especially since I can't work physically. Although I've tried, it's just that, well, I've lost some of my skills and physical abilities to do so. [pulling on a cigarette] And at some point, I was hoping to get some road construction work, because it's possible. My brother worked on the road, but I can't. [pulling on a cigarette] I must be in the office, unfortunately.

In the above quote, Julian combines various issues and uses a background construction (Schütze, 2008) to explain why he had to look for a job (and, in perspective, to manage the trajectory he fell into) outside of his own town. Work, even if it is available in his hometown, is out of his reach due to him being labeled a "difficult" worker who does not agree to be exploited or who is directly cheated by employers. Julian also points out that this social stigma also affects his twin brother, who is able work physically. Unfortunately, the narrator does not have such a possibility.

I will now move on to the coda, i.e. the structure that summarizes the autobiographical narrative (Schütze, 2008: 16–18):

Julian: Well, now I'm a smart guy, and I'm not gonna let myself be put on the horse, but frankly speaking, until I had an employment contract, I wasn't a smart guy. I wasn't a smart guy, because it seems to me that the workforce is even stronger than the proposed salary. For me. Of course, there are people who prefer to sit at home and wait for better times. Not me, because I'd go crazy sitting at home. The second thing is, I'm young, I have some kind of ambition, mm sometimes it may be high, but I want to achieve it. Just like that. Sitting at home wouldn't change anything.

Julian's coda structure includes the transition he made after he found a job. Getting a full-time job formalized under a regular contract of employment gave him the inner strength to say that "now he is a smart guy". At the same time, he immediately set in motion an argumentation structure in which he explains why he had previously given in to the forced labor and why he again tried to find a job – this time effectively.

## Conclusions

The analysis of the interview with Julian shows one of the possible perspectives of the experience of a young, precarious employee trying to get a higher education. Julian tries to achieve his goal, but he is double-affected by precariousness mechanisms. On the one hand, he is a member of the generation that enters the labor market dominated by civil-law contracts (the so-called junk contracts). For many of his peers (and Julian himself), a permanent employment contract is a dream rather than a standard they meet when looking for their first chances to earn money. On the other hand, Julian has experienced secondary precarization owing to the indirect effect of his family's financial situation and, above all, his father's biographical experiences. He, in turn, became a victim of the processes that are characteristic of the Polish transformation. We do not know many details about the period of his father's unemployment (e.g. when it started or ended), but from the available scraps of information, we can conclude that it was typical of the collapse of a public workplace in a small town that was unable to compete on the free market.

The second important thread when assessing Julian's biography is (owing to the efforts of his parents) the issue of internalizing the vision of education as a key competence for achieving not only professional success but treating it as a path to a good life. The narrator's efforts are reminiscent of Sisyphus' work, when he tries time and again to study and, above all, to make a living to make ends meet. However, Julian's case is evidence of the primacy of the Marx base over the superstructure – without economic security, it is impossible to implement the biographical action plan that he is building. What is more, the combination of the imperative of studying and the structural conditions under which this imperative is realized trigger the trajectory potential, which ultimately results in the trajectory of suffering being the main process structure of the interview. Julian lost control of his biography – he could not find a job, so he could not stay at university. Ultimately, he fell into depression, as confirmed by an external authority through medical diagnosis. This allowed him to leave (at least for a certain period) a self-destructive plan, but at the same time, it did not release him from a sense of lack of control. He regained this, at least partially, after finding a job in the library.

It is worth comparing Julian's experience to an interview with life story that can be treated as maximum contrast – interview with Czesia (born 1964), an academic teacher, who developed intensive post-graduate educational career to sustain her position in work. I use this narrative in a very specific context due to significant contrast against Julian's case. Czesia is older, with much more stable professional career and family background. However, similarly to Julian, she was under educational and labor market pressure as well, but, in contrast to Julian's case again, she was able to transform her capitals and biographical resources into satisfactory path to career stability:

Czesia: On the other hand, there was a lack of qualifications somewhere, and above all, a lack of documents, yes, the so-called papers. So, in 2009, I went on sick leave for six months and then I went for a postgraduate diploma in education for people with intellectual disabilities", and since we were offered special education with integrated education at half price, I automatically did these two postgraduate courses. Eh, later the situation arose that my friend and I, who also works with me and is a midwife, we wanted to keep our license, and there's a rule that if you don't work in your profession for five years, you have to renew your diploma. So to avoid that, well, we said, if there was such an option, we could keep our license, because you never know, so our friends suggested that we go for a gynaecological specialization, because at that time there was a grant and also a postgraduate course in perinatal education was starting. So we started doing this two-year gynaecological specialization at the same time, which ended with a state exam in Warsaw [laughs]. Hah, and at the same time, we also did that one-year postgraduate course in perinatal education. All the postgraduate courses have been one year long, so far.

In the above quotation, we can see how a different logic of continuing higher education works here than in Julian's case. Czesia is goal-oriented and treats subsequent studies as a teleological activity. Julian, on the other hand, operates to a lesser extent in the logic of investing in higher education. This experience has an autotelic character in his case, which strengthens the trajectory potential located in his educational experiences. Possible failure carries a much heavier biographical burden than it does for Czesia.

However, looking at the wider context and trying to link the analysis of an individual case with the wider social processes observed over the last 30 years, it should be stressed that in the case of Julian's biography, educational problems play a contextual role in contrast to work-related issues with which he was struggling with his whole adult life. Distortion, in this context, simply means different mechanisms of work precarization. From the junk contracts mentioned above, through the ineffective and unprotective laws and public institutions, which do not protect employees, to Julian's individualization of guilt over the lack of success, we can create a long list of problems that individuals have to deal with.

The myth of higher education in Julian's case overlaps with the broader problem that both Julian and his family face. Poland's socio-political transformation processes in the 1990s saw the closure of many enterprises that had often been the main workplace for the local towns. The resulting poverty brought

more than just temporary financial problems. Julian's case shows that with overlapping health issues (i.e. his illness), the situation did not change significantly, even though his father found a job. Julian touches on this when talking about his place in the social hierarchy:

Julian: Oh, if in an economic sense, it is difficult for me to find people below my economic status. Because I do not consider economic status to be just flows, but the actual state of the account and how much is going in. I also don't know if there are people with a lower status. I think I am/that I belong to this group of low economic status, and it is simply difficult for me to find someone from an even lower group. [laughs].

This sad extract, although it is not Julian's final statement in the interview, reflects the scale of the problems he faces. In the final analyses of the project, in which we focused on developing a typology of life strategies, Julian's case was categorized as a professional type that describes – in the sphere of work – strategies that combine relatively high resources of cultural capital with the search for the stability of employment. Work has an autotelic value here as a source not only of earnings but also of social status. High resources of cultural capital in the form of formalized higher education or cultural competences transferred and acquired outside formal education (e.g. within the family) are also crucial for social status. The desired working environment is related to relatively high earnings, regular working hours, and long-term employment, all of which together are intended to draw strict boundaries between working life and life outside work. All of this makes up the expected pattern of a regular biography within a well-organized (in the sense of Max Weber) bureaucratic organization, in the office, in public services, or in a large corporation (Mrozowicki, Czarzasty, 2019: 356).

However, Julian is not able to implement a biographical action plan based on the values cited in the quotation. Although he ultimately went to work in a public institution and is satisfied with it in terms of self-confidence, he is not able to exceed the safety threshold in a material sense. Here, however, the boundaries are set beyond it – they are based on structural processes that affect the entire labor market. They are also partly global in nature, going beyond the Polish perspective.

As a final argumentation, I would like to refer to Domański's (2018) analysis on the impact of higher education on earnings distribution in Poland between 1988 and 2013. The author suggests that we can observe constant importance of higher education diplomas in gaining financial bonus in further steps of professional career. However, he notices that the social impact of the general belief in such mechanism is an important factor in building the middle class. Julian's case can be treated as an example of the clash of aroused educational expectations with the hostile labor market based on the precarization of work, which eventually led to collective disappointment, which – if we think about a possible number of such stories – can have significant social consequences.

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### Cytowanie

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## Problemy edukacyjne i ich znaczenie w doświadczaniu prekaryjności przez młodych Polaków

**Abstrakt:** Artykuł koncentruje się na badaniu związku między doświadczaniem problemów edukacyjnych a prekaryzacją w dalszej karierze zawodowej młodych Polaków. Główne zainteresowania autora koncentrują się na doświadczeniach biograficznych w sferze edukacji wyższej i pracy. Bada, w jaki sposób problemy występujące na różnych poziomach edukacji mogą wpływać na historie życia i jak mogą być powiązane ze zmaganiem na rynku pracy, co ostatecznie prowadzić może do zwiększania potencjałów trajektoryjnych i do trajektorii cierpienia.

W części empirycznej artykułu autor skupia się na analizie jednego przypadku – biograficznego wywiadu narracyjnego przeprowadzonego z Julianem, młodym sprekaryzowanym pracownikiem, któremu nie udało się uzyskać dyplomu uniwersyteckiego. Stara się zweryfikować hipotezę na temat związku pomiędzy doświadczanymi przez niego problemami edukacyjnymi a niepewną sytuacją na rynku pracy, który był jednym z głównych czynników doświadczania przez narratora kolejnych faz trajektorii cierpienia. Z drugiej strony bada rolę mitu dyplomu uniwersyteckiego jako pokoleniowego czynnika napędzającego mobilność klasową.

**Słowa kluczowe:** problemy edukacyjne, prekaryzacja pracy, socjologia biograficzna, mobilność klasowa