

# Meanings of work in the narratives of Italian, Estonian, and Polish young people who experience labour market insecurity

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## Introduction

Ever since the mid-19th century, paid work has held a central role in modern societies, not only in securing social inclusion and integration but also in constructing individual and social identities (Albano and Parisi, 2017).<sup>1</sup> This chapter focuses on the ways in which youth in different national contexts construct the meaning of work and the expectations towards work that are embedded in their personal labour market experiences. Qualitative interviews are analysed from Italy, Estonia, and Poland – different countries that share some cultural and institutional characteristics. All three countries belong to Western culture, yet Estonia and Poland share a post-socialist past, whereas Poland and Italy are Catholic countries, and are thus more likely to hold certain traditional views, all which might shape the meanings of work.

According to the European Values Study (EVS) 2008, work is *very* important in one's life for about 64 per cent of respondents in Italy, 56 per cent in Poland, and 46 per cent in Estonia. There are some age variations. In Poland and Estonia, young people (aged 15 to 29 years) indicate that the level of significance of work in their lives is similar to the country average; but for youth in Italy, work is somewhat less significant (57 per cent) compared to the Italian average. Hence, quantitative data suggest that work holds a different position in young people's lives in these three countries.

The aim of this chapter is to study whether and how meanings given to work differ for youth in Italy, Poland, and Estonia by analysing qualitative semi-structured interviews. To some extent, interviewees have faced or are still facing labour market insecurities (for example,

unemployment and low salary as well as part-time, temporary, or non-contractual jobs). Thus, the way they construct the meanings of work is likely to be shaped not only by cultural and structural conditions but also by their specific labour market experiences. Therefore, this study investigates whether different country contexts reveal differences or similarities in constructing meanings of work depending on young people's experience of the labour market.

As described in the following section, a vast body of research is based on quantitative analysis. Hence, the study presented here gives valuable qualitative insight into understanding how work-related meanings are constructed, presented, and interpreted by youth in their personal narratives, with a focus on three country cases.

The conceptual framework and the classification of the meanings of work stems from the work of Jahoda (1981, 1982), Warr (1987, 2007), and Albano and Parisi (2017). These all deal with the classification of work characteristics or functions to represent the different meanings or values attached to them.

## Theoretical considerations

Many empirical value studies deal with attitudes and values in relation to work because of the importance of work not only as a primary source of income or economic security but also as a basis for other phenomena of social life such as social participation, social status, identity, consumption patterns, health, and family life (Roe and Ester, 1999).

Since Rosenberg's (1957) study of young people's occupational choices, much attention has been paid to the value assigned to various aspects of work. Moreover, research on work-related attitudes and work or occupation selection criteria has been fostered since the 1980s, when the EVS, a large-scale, cross-national, and longitudinal survey on basic human values, was established.

This chapter focuses on meanings of work, but first also the concept of values should be defined, although these are not complete synonyms. Both meanings and values concern the *importance* or the worth of something for someone; one could say that if something – for instance, a certain aspect of work – is meaningful, then it holds importance or value. Although the respective literature reveals numerous definitions of values (Allport, 1955; Rokeach, 1973; Hofstede, 1980), there is, nonetheless, a consensus about the core of the concept. According to social psychologists, values are cognitive structures that guide human conduct by influencing the processes by which people represent and

evaluate themselves and the world (Allport, 1955; Hofstede, 1980). Values are relatively stable over time; they concern ideas and beliefs related to individuals' main goals of life and the achievement of these goals in ways that they consider to be 'right'. Furthermore, values are ordered in terms of their relative importance and they therefore form a system of priorities (Schwartz, 1994; Smith and Schwartz, 1997).

Hofstede (1980) assumed that work values can be interpreted as the extent to which people attach importance to various job characteristics, aspects, or, in Jahoda's (1981) terminology (see following paragraph), functions. Thus, by analysing functions of work that appear in youth narratives, one can touch upon more general values or meanings of work. The following introduces three classifications of work characteristics that are summarised and systematised in Table 6.1.

Jahoda, an Austrian psychologist, was interested in the value and meanings of work in a modern industrial society. She supported her empirical work with Merton's paradigm of functional analysis that led her to distinguish between *manifest*, 'deliberately intended', and *latent*, 'unintended by-products of purposeful action', functions of employment (Jahoda, 1981). She assumed that 'earning a living' is a main manifest function of work, and codified latent functions of work as follows. First, work gives a time structure to the day – lack of it might be devastating for an individual (feeling bored, wasting time, and so on) (Jahoda, 1982: 24). Second, employment gives numerous opportunities for social contacts and shared experience with people 'outside the nuclear family'. Third, it provides an opportunity to strive towards 'goals and purposes that transcend their own' – a sense of a collective purpose: being useful to other people. Fourth, it 'defines aspects of personal status and identity', and, lastly, it 'enforces activity'.

Jahoda used her model to explain the lower level of well-being of unemployed people who were deprived of all or some of these functions. She stated that latent functions of employment help understanding of 'motivation to work that goes beyond earning a living' and give necessary 'ties to reality' that are essential for human well-being. Nonetheless, employment itself might also bring negative psychological consequences, and Jahoda also admits that there might be other latent functions of employment or that they might be covered by other social institutions besides work (Jahoda, 1981).

Jahoda's theory has been applied in numerous studies on well-being and work. Some of these question the significance of certain latent functions (Paul and Batinic, 2010) or discuss their relative importance (Waters and Moore, 2002), but the overall model has proved to be a useful theoretical framework (see also Hoare and Machin, 2006).

**Table 6.1:** Summary of concepts regarding meanings of work

<b>Manifest (deliberately intended)</b>	<b>Latent (unintended by-products)</b>					
Earning a living/ Availability of money/ Good pay Career outlook/ Good job security	<b>Intrinsic</b> <i>Features within job tasks themselves (related to inner motivation; what gives quiet satisfaction; the value it has 'in itself')</i>			<b>Extrinsic</b> <i>Attributes external to job tasks (work as instrument; what one can get out of work, tangible work characteristics)</i>		
	Jahoda	Warr	Albano and Parisi*	Jahoda	Warr	Albano and Parisi
	Opportunities for social contact and shared experience	Opportunity for interpersonal contact	Meeting people	Gives a time structure to the day	<i>Externally generated goals</i>	To have time off at the weekends Generous holidays
	Opportunity to strive towards 'goals and purposes that transcend their own'	<i>Externally generated goals Equity: morality in an employer's relationship with society</i>	A job in which you feel you can achieve something A useful job for society	Enforces activity	<i>Externally generated goals</i>	
	Defines aspects of personal identity	Opportunity for skill use Opportunity for control	A job that meets one's abilities An opportunity to use initiative	Defines aspects of personal status	Valued social position	
		Variety	A job that is interesting		Environmental clarity Supportive supervision <i>Equity: fairness of employment relationship</i> Physical security of job environment	Not too much pressure

Notes: Italics indicate meanings of work that appear in more than one cell.

\* Albano and Parisi's (2017) classification of work-related aspects is based on the EVS using items that have been included in the questionnaire over several survey waves

Source: Jahoda, 1981; 1982; Warr, 1987; 2007; Albano and Parisi, 2017; authors' own interpretations

Warr (1987), from a psychological standpoint, described nine main characteristics of the environment in employment that are also applicable in unemployment (or retirement). An insufficient level of these features would define a bad job. Warr stressed that several job characteristics do not have a linear relationship with a good job and thus with individual well-being or happiness. The following six features contribute to individual happiness to a limited extent: (a) *opportunity for control* over activities and events; (b) *opportunity for skill use* and development; (c) *externally generated goals* (obligations and targets deriving from multiple roles); (d) *variety* in job requirements; (e) *environmental clarity* (transparency of other people and systems); and (f) *opportunity for interpersonal contact*. Too much or too little of each of these job characteristics may bring about undesirable levels of psychological stress. Linearly related to well-being are the following job features: (g) *availability of money*; (h) *physical security* at the workplace; and (i) *valued social position* (such as status in society, task significance, meaningfulness, contribution to the community, wider society).

Warr (2007) introduced another three job characteristics that are specifically relevant for employment: (j) *supportive supervision*; (k) *career outlook* (security of employment, availability of extended tenure, promotion, and so on); and (l) *equity* (for example, fairness in employment relationship, no discrimination, morality in an employer's relationship with society).

Warr's nine-component framework builds on Jahoda's theorising in that her *contacts with people outside family* and *personal status and identity* appear as the environmental features *contact with others* and *valued social position* (Warr, 2007: 90). Jahoda's other three latent functions are subsumed here within *externally generated goals*, and Warr has added other environmental characteristics. This extension is consistent with Jahoda's observation, because she states that there are other latent by-products in addition to five broad latent categories (1981: 189).

Albano and Parisi (2017) presented analyses of a quantitative longitudinal dataset – the EVS 1981–2008/9 – covering a period that is long enough to be able to detect changes in individuals' value systems. The authors used one of the most common dichotomous classifications of work-related values: intrinsic versus extrinsic (Kalleberg, 1977; Ros et al, 1999). *Intrinsic* values or meanings are related mostly to inner motivation and self-realisation but also to the social aspects of work: a job that is interesting, in which you feel you can achieve something, an opportunity to use initiative, a job that matches one's abilities, a useful job for society, or meeting people. In contrast, *extrinsic* meanings represent instrumental aspects of work: good pay, good job security,

not too much pressure, to have time off at the weekends, and generous holidays. Based on their analysis of five European countries, Albano and Parisi (2017) concluded that work values remain stable over time between cohorts, demonstrating the specific character of work values acquired in a given cultural climate.

Regarding Italy, Albano and Parisi (2017: 72) found that the importance assigned to good pay alongside job security did not change over the period 1981–2009, but that each separate aspect of work increased in its significance. Nonetheless, in the latter part of this period (1999–2009), the importance of all work characteristics declined (social aspects somewhat more than intrinsic and extrinsic).

Based on the EVS, but focusing on Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, Borgulya and Hahn (2013) found a rather stable value system during the period 1999–2009. Nevertheless, extrinsic aspects of work increased: in particular, good hours and generous holidays gained in importance. There was also a moderate increase in the importance of intrinsic work orientations such as a wish to have an interesting or responsible job and to achieve something. However, they found that usefulness for society had decreased in its importance.

Value studies broadly agree that people in industrialised countries, or countries with a similar level of development, have relatively similar work values (Mortimer and Lorence, 1995). The nature of the work is shaped by both the wider social structure and the different management styles and organisational cultures in enterprises. It is considered that although there might be differences between countries in work values, their nature and the factors that shape them are similar.

Research on work values often assumes that youth value paid work less than older generations because of their insecure labour market position or their post-materialist values (Hagström and Gamberale, 1995; Hult and Svallfors, 2002; see also Inglehart, 1971). Indeed, a study from the 1990s showed an increase in intrinsic work values among youth due to post-materialist values (Hagström and Gamberale, 1995). However, research indicates that unemployed young adults do value work and prefer full-time jobs (Hult and Svallfors, 2002). Based on 11 European countries, Rainsford et al (2019) found that among youth, overqualification is associated with higher levels of extrinsic work values; and in the case of a somewhat older group of younger adults (closer to 35 years of age), unemployment has a negative effect on intrinsic values. Thus, young people are not a homogeneous group in relation to how unemployment and low quality work conditions shape their work values.

In terms of Jahoda's (1982) distinction between manifest and latent work functions, a study of six European countries indicated that youth

value both – that is, not only salary but also regular and meaningful activity, social contacts, status, identity, and personal development (Bergqvist and Eriksson, 2015). Hence, studies show that extrinsic and intrinsic work values or manifest and latent work functions do not contradict each other, but rather coexist together to form a specific individual value pattern (Gesthuizen and Verbakel, 2011).

## **Institutional context**

One could ask how the institutional context shapes the meanings of work that are based on values and are probably related more to the cultural context. However, as pointed out by Jahoda (1981), other institutions have the potential to fulfil the functions of work. Therefore, the institutional context frames the experiences of youth, either by helping or not helping to cover some functions of work; and by doing so, it shapes the meanings of work.

The three countries analysed represent different ideal-typical welfare state regimes in terms of Esping-Andersen's (1990) well-known typology. According to the extensions of the classical tripolar typology, Italy represents the Southern European welfare state (Ferrera, 1996; Bonoli, 1997), whereas post-socialist Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries are often either excluded or classified as one homogeneous group. Over the last decade, the CEE countries have received more attention, and variation among them has been recognised. Hence, Estonia and Poland are mostly classified as different types of welfare state regimes: Estonia as a former USSR type and Poland as a post-communist European type (Fenger, 2007), whereas according to Aspalter et al (2009), the Polish welfare state has evolved into the continental European type. Extensions of the varieties of capitalism literature (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Ebbinghaus and Manow, 2003) classify Estonia as a neoliberal type (weak welfare state with radically liberalised markets) and Poland as an embedded neoliberal type (more socially inclusive, less market-radical compared to Estonia) (Bohle and Greskovits, 2007). The following section provides a more detailed overview of the institutional characteristics relevant to the present analysis.

### *Providing sufficient income*

In case of unemployed youth, Estonia differs from Poland and Italy because in the latter two, youth looking for their first job are not entitled to unemployment benefits. However, in Estonia, the amount

of unemployment allowance is insufficient to replace the income from paid employment (about one third of the minimum wage in 2016 when interviews were conducted), and higher unemployment insurance benefit depends on tenure, and is, therefore, often out of reach for young people (Reiska et al, 2018).

Youth entering the labour market who are either unemployed or earning low wages could be entitled to income support. In this respect, young people find themselves in different situations. In Italy, there is no national and universal minimum income insurance or individual insurance (Bertolini et al, 2018a). In Estonia, low level support exists, but access to it is restricted based on the total income divided per household member (youth living with parents are often not eligible) (Reiska et al, 2018). In Poland, the general scheme of last resort with additional categorical benefits covers most people in need of support (Bertolini et al, 2018a): social assistance benefits are granted to those whose income is below a certain threshold, and there are different types of additional allowances.

### *Providing meaningful activity and social contact*

Although there is no question that meaningful activity can be found outside of the institutional framework in, for example, volunteering, hobbies, and so forth (Jahoda, 1981), active labour market policies (ALMPs) can also cater for these needs. In Italy, the ALMPs targeted at youth are few, whereas in Poland and Estonia, there are some specific measures, and their importance has increased (Bertolini et al, 2018a). Based on the investment in ALMPs targeted at all unemployed, Bertolini et al (2018a: 26) stated that Italy is characterised by a low level of investment, whereas Poland and Estonia have recently started spending more.

### *Career outlook and job security*

Job security as well as possibilities of career advancement depend on the country context. In terms of labour market regulation, Italy and Poland have a similar system with a highly segmented labour market and large differences between highly regulated protected and weakly regulated unprotected contract types. In Estonia, there is low segmentation in the labour market and limited use of temporary or part-time contracts (Bertolini et al, 2018a). The percentage of temporary contracts makes these country differences evident: in Estonia, only 11.2 per cent of youth have temporary contracts, whereas the share of youth working on temporary contracts is 48.6 per cent in Italy and 64.4 per cent in Poland



**Table 6.2:** Characterisation of national context (2015)

	Unemployment rate (%)		NEET rate	Part-time employment (%)			Temporary contracts	
	Under 25 years	25–74 years		15–24 years	15–64 years	Involuntary part-time employment (age 15–24)	15–24 years	15–64 years
Italy	10.6	6.1	21.3	29.5	9.5	8.8	11.2	3.1
Estonia	5.5	4.1	10.8	22.8	18.3	83.7*	48.6	10.8
Poland	6.8	4.2	11.0	14.1	6.8	25.6	64.4	22.2
EU avg.	8.4	5.6	12.0	32.3	19.6	28.0	40.3	11.9

Note: \*Data for the group aged 15–24 years is not available for Estonia, so data is provided for the 15–29 age group instead.

Source: Eurostat, 2018

(Table 6.2). However, the low labour market regulation in Estonia also makes it easier to dismiss employees with permanent contracts (Bertolini et al, 2018a). In the 15 to 24 years age group, part-time employment is most widespread in Italy (29.5 per cent), but what is more important, for 83.7 per cent of Italian youth, the decision to work part-time is involuntary. In Estonia and Poland in contrast, where the share of youth working part-time is lower, this is mostly voluntary (Table 6.2).

Possibilities of finding a job and career advancement also depend on the level of unemployment. In 2015,<sup>2</sup> youth unemployment was highest in Italy (10.6 per cent), whereas in Estonia and Poland, it was below the EU average. Moreover, the NEET rate was highest in Italy (about 20 per cent) compared to close to 10 per cent in Estonia and Poland (Table 6.2).

## Research questions

The contextual information provided previously suggests that both differences and similarities can be expected when comparing the meanings youth give to work in the three countries. Hence, the question here is what are the differences and similarities between the meanings of work and the expectations towards work constructed in the narratives of youth in different contexts?

## Data and methodology

The empirical material consists of 143 interviews with youth aged 18 to 30 years who are in an insecure labour market situation, conducted

**Table 6.3:** Sample description

	Education			Employment status			
	Low (ISCED 0–2)	Medium (ISCED 3–4)	High (ISCED 5–6)	Unemployed	Temporary work	Permanent work	NEET
Italy ( <i>n</i> = 50)	12	26	12	21	17	6	6
Estonia ( <i>n</i> = 53)	23	21	9	37	10	4	2
Poland ( <i>n</i> = 40)	7	21	12	18	19	3	0

Note: In many cases, interviewees who defined themselves as unemployed had some non-contractual work experience.

in Estonia, Italy, and Poland from the end of 2015 to November 2016. All country samples are well balanced in terms of gender and age. In terms of education, the sampling target was set at reaching youth with low and medium levels of education, because these are the groups facing more difficulties on the labour market. The interviewees' employment status reflects the situation of youth in the national labour market described in the previous section (see [Table 6.3](#)).

The methodology used in this article draws on the framework adapted in the EXCEPT project (Bertolini et al, 2018b). In the first phase, interview data were analysed using thematic analysis that involves searching through a dataset for repeated patterns of work meanings (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Grunow and Evertsson, 2016) as described in [Table 6.1](#). Additional meanings emerging from data were added. The second phase consisted of comparing the coded qualitative information across the three countries and observing how different or similar meanings of work emerge in the interviews with young people. The comparison between these data corpuses was carried out using thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Analysis of specific themes (the manifest and latent meanings of work) was conducted by taking the themes deriving from country analysis and assembling them into similar, coherent categories. Decisions about how to group themes and categories were made based on the content, and, where appropriate, on theoretical grounds. These groupings compose the thematic networks.

## Findings

Drawing on Merton's paradigm of functional analysis, manifest, 'deliberately intended' functions of employment could be differentiated

from latent, ‘unintended’ functions. The analysis is structured based on [Table 6.1](#) which summarises the conceptual framework, starting with the description of manifest functions of work followed by intrinsic and extrinsic latent functions of work.

### *Manifest functions of work*

Following Jahoda (1981), earning a living is the main manifest function of work. Warr (1987) added job security and career outlook to this category. These theoretical considerations are reflected in the narratives of interviewees.

In all three countries, work was most often defined through its basic manifest, extrinsic function: *source of financial resources*. Interviewees often stressed that the crucial aspect of work is an adequate income. However, youth were not overly demanding – they defined good pay as one that is sufficient to allow them to manage everyday expenses. The emphasis interviewees placed on aspects of their experience varied slightly by country. For example, in Estonia, the relative importance of good pay seems to be greater for those who are unemployed such as Marju, who has done some service sector jobs for the past three years without being offered a stable job:

‘Well, main role is making money, that’s what it means. One must work to earn as much as possible, the better life you have. [pause] At the moment, looking for example, at customer services, then a desk-job, working with people, from 9 to 5, so that Saturdays-Sundays would be free.’ (Marju, F, 28, LE, U, EE)

A similar pattern was observed in Poland: unemployed people were more prone to focus on the manifest functions of employment. It might be hypothesised that this attitude was a direct consequence of unemployment: if they have no job, youth lower their expectations towards work. For example, Paweł finished basic vocational school, but did not manage to find a job in his field – car mechanics. Instead, he worked informally as a waiter. With low and unstable income, he was forced to live with his parents – in this situation, the only short-term priority was to earn more.

‘My work was supposed to be something that I really like doing and it should bring me some money, but it comes out that now I’m just looking for some work to get some money.’ (Paweł, M, 20, ME, U, PL)

Within the Polish sample, lower educated youth tend to focus even more on the instrumental aspect of a job, whereas the better educated mention it among intrinsic meanings of work. For example, Zenek (M, 24, LE, NCJ, PL) focuses only on earning money “to live, pay the bills, everything”. In contrast, Ewa, a representative of the better educated, puts the financial dimension first, but also mentions several intrinsic values: a job giving the opportunity for social contacts or work as a source of satisfaction:

‘So, for me, work is mainly about the salary plus some kind of fun because you spend time with people and satisfaction, something like this, let’s say.’ (Ewa, F, 30, HE, TE, PL)

In Estonia, some interviewees seemed to value salary somewhat less if it meant they could do a *job they like* or a job that is related to their field of studies, whereas working only for money was associated with something involuntary. This is well illustrated by Tauri from a small Estonian town in which job opportunities are scarce; his ideal job would be as a car mechanic:

‘If I worked in the field I have studied, then well. [pause] When I would receive more or less, let’s say, normal, above minimum wage, then you just work like that. You can work even like that. ... Yes, these are two different things. When you like the job, then you go to work, you can stay longer and do it and this is good and you will get more money. [pause] But when it is only, that you need to do it. [pause] That you need to earn money to live, then you are there against your own will actually. These are two different things.’ (Tauri, M, 22, LE, U, EE)

Youth who were underemployed or had dull, uninteresting jobs often focused on the financial aspects of work. One of the strategies executed in such situations was transposition: while claiming that their work is only there to provide money for a living, they mentioned other life domains in which they satisfy their needs (such as hobbies, family). For example, Magda, from a city where there is a high demand for jobs that do not require higher education, had impressive work experience, but many of the jobs available were below her qualifications. She described her job in terms of a source of money necessary to pursue her passions:

‘For me, to work is to be able to realise my dreams later on. I don’t work for the work itself, it’s just to be able to do something afterwards. It’s just to earn some money. And then, possibly I could do what I like.’ (Magda, F, 28, HE, NCJ, PL)

It is obvious that any type of work is associated with a given social role: a professional status. However, in the case of youth, job and related salary might be regarded not only as a source of income but also as an indicator of public *recognition*, equitable treatment, and a sign of one’s achievements. These are, again, latent functions of a job that are closely related to its main manifest function. For example, the recognition and dignity that work gives is very important for Helena, a mother raising three children who therefore has practically no work experience and has never applied for a job:

‘When you are just at home and you get the childcare allowance and the social services pay your bills. It is like, well, money for nothing. But I think if you do something and get money for it, it feels better [laughs] I think so.’ (Helena, F, 24, LE, U, childcare leave, EE)

In Poland and Italy, interviewees’ statements about work were strongly related to *autonomy*. They associated work with the possibility of living independent lives. Being able to provide for yourself was recognised as a proof of adulthood, a sign of an identity as a grown-up person. For instance, this is evident in the case of Mara. At the time of the interview, she had been unemployed for four months and was struggling to find a job. Absence of work, the consequent lack of money, and the inactivity are at the centre of her story. She strongly connects the meaning of work with autonomy:

‘[work means] Independence. Really, it’s really the word that comes [pause] to do what I want, how I want, when I want, a future, to have a future. Because at the moment I don’t see it, meaning that at home with my parents I cannot see it. A future as an independent person. [pause] Being a kept person, for now, it’s not nice to say so, but [pause] if don’t have any help, now, from what I read, they will give some money, to those who turn 18. And those who have turned 18 for quite some time already? What should they do?’ (Mara, F, 29, LE, U, IT)

A very similar pattern could be recognised in Joanna's story. She perceived a job with an adequate income as a ticket for leaving the parental home:

R: The lack of money was really bothering me. A lot. This financial independence. You had to ask for everything, right? Even though I had everything that I needed from my parents, but I wanted to have more, and I wanted to manage it by myself.

I: You just wanted to move out to take up some job?

R: Actually yes, to have my own money. (Joanna, F, 27, ME, NCJ, PL)

Obviously, work provides the necessary funds to rent a flat and cover everyday expenses. However, the same manifest function has an important symbolic and latent dimension. Labour income serves as a way to demonstrate independence from parents, it is symbolic confirmation of becoming an adult, or it is simply the minimal condition to be met to leave the parental home or start one's own family and live an independent, serious life. These patterns were visible in Italy and Poland, but less evident in Estonia. The explanation might be that Polish and Italian youth encounter more structural (such as availability of housing) or cultural barriers when leaving the parental home than their Estonian counterparts.<sup>3</sup>

Important issues related to income were *stability* and *predictability*. Estonian and Polish youth defined job security in various ways: for those who work unofficially, it means that the salary is paid as agreed. For others, it is having a (permanent) contract or the prospect of stable employment in the future. In Poland, temporary contracts are so common among young people that they are not perceived as a problem. This is understandable considering the very good performance of the labour market: a high level of temporary contracts is cushioned by a relatively low level of youth unemployment. Thus, for Polish interviewees, subjective job insecurity mattered more than the type of contract.<sup>4</sup>

According to Italian interviews, as for the previous generation, the idea of a permanent job is very persistent among young people, despite the drastic changes in the labour market: temporary work is widespread among the young, but unlike in Poland, it is combined with a high level of youth unemployment. Some young Italians see their future as very traditional – for example, having a child conditional on getting a permanent contract. Giulia (F, 26, LE, PE, IT) luckily

got her permanent contract and is now making her plans: in the next five years, she wants to have her first child, buy a car, and buy a house.

In sum, despite all these differences, the majority of interviewees agree that earning money is the fundamental aspect of any job. However, those who did not point to any other important aspects were in the minority: usually, different meanings and dimensions of work overlap in their statements. A good example is Reena's definition of work – she lists many aspects of work and mentions salary only as the last one:

'Where I feel that I am needed, useful, that my work is a lot of help, that I can do it and I feel that I want to go to work. Wake up with this feeling. And, of course [pause] the physical conditions should be good, not these bad conditions for example light. Such elementary things. So, there would be lots of light and comfortable to work. There are no problems with temperature and such things. And, of course, people also, who you work with, they support each other and [pause] comfortable working environment. ... Well and also the salary.' (Reena, F, 27, HE, U, EE)

The following section examines other work aspects that are important for the interviewees.

### ***Latent functions of work***

As stated previously, the narratives of youth most often combine several latent and manifest functions when describing the meaning of work. This section seeks to distinguish the two types of latent function – intrinsic and extrinsic – in the stories of young people.

### ***Latent intrinsic aspects of work***

Starting with latent intrinsic aspects, the most pronounced in all the countries is the wish to have an *interesting job*. As Michalina from Poland puts it, she does not want to be forced to do something she does not like. Tauri from Estonia, quoted in the previous section, also sees working only for money as doing something involuntary:

'For me, a job should be something that I really want to do. I can't imagine to be forced to work, to do something that I don't like, wake up every day with a pain that I need to go to work.' (Michalina, F, 26, ME, NCJ, PL)

Connected with the idea of an interesting job, youth in all three countries emphasise *self-development* or *using one's skills and abilities*. For instance, for Polish youth, a job was often perceived as a path towards self-development and self-fulfilment, the manifest function of earning a living being mentioned along with these latent functions:

'Well, a job for me is a chance to grow, to gain new skills, and let's say, building my own character, some positive traits. ... but also just to earn money, to have something to afford living, pursuing my hobbies, outside of work.' (Anna, F, 27, HE, U, PL)

Likewise, in the narratives of employed Italian young people, the meaning of work is connected to *self-fulfilment*; and often, the desire to start working is linked with the wish to gain experience, whatever the contractual conditions may be. As in the Polish case mentioned previously, for Veronica, self-realisation is combined with the manifest function of earning a living.

'Well, [work] means from the most basic things, such as earning money to survive, basically to reach a goal, something, I mean, something I studied for, I worked for, for years, and at the same time ... the image, for me, of work, that I would like it to be, but maybe it's not, it is a work that would give me a personal satisfaction [pause] not just work to purely survive, but a job that gives me satisfaction, that makes me [pause] happy. Even if I don't know whether in real life [pause] I know that now it's something quite utopian, but [pause] I hope that this would be, this will be the work.' (Veronica, F, 26, HE, U, IT)

In Estonian interviews, self-development and using one's skills were also mentioned quite often, but more by young people who had acquired some professional qualifications or had work experience, as in the case of Miina who has a bachelor's degree and, in addition to shorter term work experiences, has worked for about a year as a consultant:

'Work is [pause] I don't know, for me it's like applying some of my skills, in this sense it's not like some of my specific skills but maybe something that I know how to do or my general set of skills for something that would generate some kind of [pause] For me also voluntary work is work, especially when I was younger, but now, because everything costs money [laughs] then also this [money] is important.' (Miina, F, 24, HE, U, EE)



Going beyond self-development and skill use, interviewees in all countries mention that work provides an opportunity to *take the initiative* and *achieve something, make a difference*; but compared to previously described functions, the latter appears less in young people's narratives. There are some interviewees, for example Ott, who deem this to be very important. He has switched jobs several times because of the lack of influence he sees himself having in the company.

'I am a different kind of person. I can't keep my opinion to myself. I work in some place for a month and then already I go to the manager and make my proposals [about how to organise work better]. And if he takes these into account or not, I don't care very much, that someone who has been working there for ten years doing the same job and let's say they are offended by it or whatever. ... When I feel, that I am not needed, the work doesn't motivate me anymore. That's it.' (Ott, M, 28, HE, U, EE)

Another very frequently mentioned theme in the interviews from all three countries is the importance of *job climate* and the *relationship with colleagues*. Karolina and Agata from Poland explain that friendly colleagues provide an opportunity for communication and improve the work environment.

'I was lucky because I have really nice people in my room, they are warm, I like working there. ... [Work is] something cool. I mean, money is important as well, but I'm not coming here for the salary. For me it's more about just to go out, not to stay at home. ... I had nothing to do at home, so I preferred to go to work, as a kind of entertainment, to spend some time with people. (Karolina, F, 21, LE, TE, PL)

'Good job [pause] I would like to work in a team, in a team of young people, and I would like it to be creative, so I could create something, not just recreating others' work.' (Agata, F, 27, HE, U, PL)

The importance of friendly colleagues or being able to discuss decisions with someone is also clearly underlined by Estonian youth. Elisabet, who has been at home with children for several years and misses communication, hopes to establish friendships.

'Working conditions, working environment or a team [colleagues] could be friendly, understanding. Nobody wants, I don't know,

some kind of an arrogant manager, right. And also, I certainly like such things like if the team goes to some places together or have some events with families and such kind of things. That employers could be humane, right. These are all rather logical [self-evident] things.’ (Elisabet, F, 25, LE, U, EE)

In some cases, good relationships with colleagues and sharing knowledge (informal learning) can compensate for other shortcomings of working life. For example, Carlo from Italy says that the relationships compensate even for the salary being paid late:

‘the cool thing is the relationships, which also compensate for the fact of getting your salary late. ... The aspect that I like most about my job is its humanity, that is personal enrichment, sharing, relationships [pause] that is, the sharing of knowledge.’ (Carlo, M, 25, ME, TE, IT)

In all three countries, some interviewees mentioned the importance of the job being *useful for other people* or *society* in general; yet, this is not a widespread narrative. Michalina (F, 26, ME, NCJ, PL) from Poland and Antonio (19, M, ME, TE, IT) from Italy both stress that working for them means helping others; and in Michalina’s words, “putting someone’s good above yours, it’s about sacrificing”. Brigitta adds that the values of the workplace should be in accordance with her values, a meaning of work that could be associated with Warr’s (2007) *equity* in terms of morality in an employer’s relationship with society.

‘The environment is important for me, that I feel what I do is good and it does good to the people, I wouldn’t like to work in a restaurant where I don’t like the food or what I feel isn’t healthy or is somehow bad for the people. ... So the idea and the mission should be right, and the people there [pause] and actually the salary is also important.’ (Brigitta, F, 24, HE, NCJ, EE)

### ***Latent extrinsic aspects of work***

Compared to other functions of work described previously, latent extrinsic aspects were mentioned less frequently. However, the *time-structuring* effect of work and *security* in terms of a contract or receiving the agreed salary were mentioned in all three countries.

Youth in all countries see that work gives *structure to one’s day* and provides *meaningful activity*. Kevin (M, 24, LE, NCJ, EE) says he does

not want to be idle; doing something gives him self-confidence. Konrad describes how he was getting frustrated while unemployed – having a job was necessary to help organise his day and provide clear goals:

‘If I can do something, I’m happy, if not, I’m starting to be nervous. When I am supposed to do something and nobody wants to tell me how to do it, it’s no good.’ (Konrad, M, 23, ME, U, PL)

Mohammed makes a comparison between a person who goes to work and a “boy”, describing the structure of the day for each of the two as follows (I = Interviewer, R = Respondent).

- I: Ok [pause] you mean it also gives you a certain structure, way of life?
- R: Yes, you wake up in the morning, you go to work, in the afternoon you come back home, you do what you have to do, in the evening you may go out for a coffee or something like that, then you come home at night and you go to sleep. Instead, as a boy [pause] you go out in the morning, come back in the evening, and that’s all. (Mohammed, M, 19, LE, U, IT)

In addition, the *financial security* provided by work was mentioned in all countries, although with some variations in meaning. In Italy, youth have long-term financial security in mind: despite changes in the labour market, the idea that you can plan your life only if you have a permanent contract persists.

‘So, I’m afraid I’ll spend all my life in precarious jobs without any security or economic stability – and economic stability gives psychological stability. If you don’t have the first you don’t have the second, you’re always in a state of anxiety because you don’t know how the month is going to end, if you have debts you don’t know what’s going to happen, and if something unexpected happens . . . unfortunately I can see that money is very important, it’s extremely difficult to go into society without it [pause] even on the level of friendship. It’s hard to be friends, it’s hard to find a girl’. (Andrea, M, 24, ME, TE, IT).

Polish youth also strive for stability in working life. This is marked by a permanent contract that would give them above all a psychological or mental sense of security. Lukasz puts the security aspect over the

potential salary and would even be ready to work for a minimum wage if the contract was permanent.

‘For me it’s always a family – in the first place, so I would like to have a stable job, I would like to have some kind of security, especially the psychological one. Not that I have one internship, then it finishes so maybe I’ll find another one, or some job on the mandatory contract ... just any job, maybe not a physical one, but more like an office job, that would give me some stability, even for the minimum wage, but stable, in which I can be certain that I’ll get the salary every month, that I could take a loan, or buy something on an instalment plan. Just to have this psychological comfort.’ (Łukasz, M, 29, HE, TE, PL)

Estonian youth talk about financial security in a short-term perspective (although for some, long-term plans were tied to this as well): a good job is one in which the salary is agreed in advance and paid on time. Mai, a single mother of two with very little work experience, describes what job security means for her: knowing what is expected of her, *environmental clarity* in Warr’s (1987) terms, and the salary being paid as agreed.

‘And that, for example, there is a certain salary. Secure job and solid salary. That, okay, I understand that work tasks sometimes change, and this is all that I can go with. But, for example, a certain solid sum, you know that you will receive it. That it does not depend on this if you are like, well I tend to do more work, if I go to work and they give me tasks to do and I get it done sooner than I’m supposed to.’ (Mai, F, 29, LE, U, EE)

In addition, among Estonian youth, importance was given to a *stress-free working environment* defined by the interviewees as “not having someone on your back” or “checking up on you”. The latter could be associated with *supportive supervision* (Warr, 2007). This is closely connected with having friendly colleagues who make a major contribution to creating a pleasant working environment.

‘Definitely the colleagues. Well, it develops over time; you can’t see it right away. So, let’s say it’s a nest of vipers [laughs], where they talk behind your back, saying you are taking their job coming here like that; I have been working here for 10 years and you come in and think you are someone [laughs]. Such attitudes, this

is stressful, then I think, I would leave this place crying. I am sensitive to such things.' (Tuuli, F, 29, ME, U, EE)

Some of the Estonian interviewees also mention the importance of *physical security* at work. For instance, Jaano, who worked in the wood industry, explains that although the salary is good, he would not take a job with harmful working conditions:

'Cleanliness for example, I went to \*\*\* [name of company]. This is a really big company, but the air inside was really awfully dusty. ... This is not good at all. My brother went to another company and there they had all these devices to suck [the dust]. Here they had nothing. ... Well yes, they offered good salary and stuff, but just the working conditions. It starts affecting your health, breathing in the sawdust and stuff, this is not good.' (Jaano, M, 27, LE, U, EE)

## Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to examine whether and how youth meanings of work differ in Italy, Poland, and Estonia. The study is based on semi-structured qualitative interviews, conducted with young people aged 18 to 30 years who share the experience of labour market insecurity (unemployment or a non-contractual, temporary, low paid, or part-time job). The analysis was structured around existing classifications of meanings and functions of work (Jahoda, 1981, 1982; Warr, 1987, 2007; Albano and Parisi, 2017) and distinguished three main categories of meanings: (a) manifest; (b) latent intrinsic; and (c) latent extrinsic.

Findings show that in the three countries analysed, the youth narratives regarding the meaning of work are largely similar. This is in accordance with value studies that maintain that due to the universality of the nature of the work, people in countries with similar levels of development will hold relatively similar work values (Mortimer and Lorence, 1995).

Rather obviously, work as a source of financial resources – that is, salary, earning a living, the *manifest function* in Jahoda's (1981) terms – is the most dominant meaning. In relation to labour market experience, the significance of salary appears to be greater for the unemployed or those with little or no work experience. This is in accordance with Inglehart's (1971) scarcity hypothesis, positing that the shift towards post-materialist values occurs after gaining material security. Results

are also in line with Rainsford et al (2019) who found that among the somewhat older group of young people in Europe (closer to 35 years of age), unemployment had a negative effect on intrinsic values.

Most studies on the meanings or values of work are quantitative. Therefore, the current analysis offers a different perspective and enables one to observe how these meanings are constructed in youth narratives. Moreover, the interviews conducted make it possible not just to point to a hierarchy of various meanings of work (Schwartz, 1994; Smith and Schwartz, 1997), but to indicate how these meanings are intertwined and form particular configurations. Thus, almost all young people emphasise some other aspects of work in addition to salary, and sometimes salary is even mentioned last (see also Bergqvist and Eriksson, 2015). Moreover, there are also those who interpret working only for money as something involuntary. For some, the *latent intrinsic functions* of work, such as an interesting, self-fulfilling job or opportunities for social contacts, can compensate for receiving a lower salary. In the latter case, young people talk about the importance of good relations with colleagues and managers and the benefits of working in a team.

Qualitative data make it possible to reveal variations in the meanings of the same categories or concepts. Providing for oneself is seen not only as a source of income but also as being associated with dignity, self-worth, stability, and – especially in the case of Poland and Italy – autonomy and adulthood (the opportunity to move out of the parental household and start a family). Estonian youth do not emphasise the link between earning a salary and autonomy, because for the most part they already live separately<sup>5</sup> (although, in several cases, with support from the family). In addition, Italian youth highly value a job with a permanent contract, whereas for Polish youth, temporary contracts are not an issue. This is because temporary work is relatively common in both countries, but in Poland, it is combined with comparatively low youth unemployment. The importance of job security in the Italian case corresponds with previous quantitative studies (Albano and Parisi, 2017). In Estonia, however, temporary work is not widespread.

Regarding *latent intrinsic functions* of work, it appears that youth in all three countries highly value jobs that are interesting and offer self-fulfilment, development, and the use of one's skills. However, such meanings of work are more prevalent in the stories of young people with a higher level of education or work experience (see also Rainsford et al, 2019). A few interviews also support Jahoda's (1981) statement that some latent functions might be provided by social institutions or domains of life other than regular employment. Thus, those who

do not have particularly interesting jobs or cannot fully apply their knowledge and skills admit that working means only earning a living; but, in turn, this enables them to satisfy latent functions such as doing something of personal interest outside working hours.

In all countries, youth value the opportunities for interpersonal contacts provided by work. They reflect on being motivated by working with others, having contact with people outside the family, discussing work-related matters, and sharing knowledge with colleagues. Sometimes, in the same context, meanings of *latent extrinsic aspects* are mentioned such as environmental clarity (knowing what one should do at work) or supportive supervision. Less apparent in youth interviews are intrinsic meanings of work associated with usefulness to society, taking the initiative, and making a difference (see also Borgulya and Hahn, 2013). Overall, *latent extrinsic aspects* of work are less prominent in youth narratives. Nonetheless, they do mention work as giving a time structure for the day as well as security. However, the concept of security is related more to financial and contractual aspects of work, whereas only Estonian interviewees also emphasise the physical security of the workplace.

Compared to previous studies, interviews with youth do not reveal new meanings of work. Nevertheless, they indicate interesting associations, interconnections, and sometimes substitutions between various meanings. In summary, youth narratives seem to confirm that individual well-being still depends on having a job (Albano and Parisi, 2017).

Qualitative studies do have their limitations, and the results presented here are not generalisable to all youth in Italy, Poland, or Estonia who have experience of labour market insecurities. However, these results deliver important subjective insights into specific youth experiences, backgrounds, and respective narratives related to the construction of work meanings.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It is debatable whether work has a central role in today's advanced modern societies. There are two currents: one underlines that work is no longer central (Arendt, 1958; Rifkin, 1995); the other emphasises the centrality of work in structuring identity, time, and organisation of life (Gallino, 2000; Paugam and Russel, 2000). However, this question is beyond the scope of the current chapter.
- <sup>2</sup> Data are provided for 2015 because the interviews took place in 2015 and 2016. Hence, these data best describe the context during the time when the interviewees were looking for a job.
- <sup>3</sup> Several stories from Estonian interviewees revealed that they left the parental home early because they had poor relations with their parents or were kicked out. In

contrast, other interviewees described how their family helped them to purchase a place of their own or how relatives offered housing rent-free.

- <sup>4</sup> However, Polish youth probably would agree that having a permanent contract is necessary in certain situations: it significantly simplifies access to bank loans and protects future employment after childbirth (not necessarily the case with temporary contracts).
- <sup>5</sup> In 2016, the average age at which young Italians left the parental household was 30.1 years. In Poland, it was 28 years. In contrast, Estonian youth left their parental homes at the average age of 23.6 years (Eurostat, 2016). These differences might be rooted in either structural (availability of affordable housing for youth) or cultural barriers.

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