Research and Innovation Podcast

ILPC Episode 2: How personal histories impact our expectations of working life

Speakers: Professor Vera Trappmann and Dr Charles Umney.

[00:00:00] **Charles:** Welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast. My name is Charles Umney and I'm an associate professor here in the Work and Employment Relations Division at Leeds University Business School.

[00:00:14] **Vera:** Hello. My name is Vera Trappmann and I'm Professor of Comparative Employment Relations in the same department as Charles. Charles and I have recently written a paper and presented it at the International Labour Process Conference (the ILPC), which is absolutely fascinating us, which is on emotions. And you might wonder "emotions and work - does that go together? How does that go together?" And we're really glad to talk to you a little bit about this paper, about the role of emotions and affects, for working life.

[00:00:49] **Charles:** Yeah. So the title of the paper is "An affective turn in the sociology of work". And the motivation for the paper was our observation of what's called the "affective turn" in wider sociological research. In other words, within kind of different fields within the wider terrain of sociology as a whole, there's been a tendency in recent years towards more interest in emotions, affective factors, and how they help us to understand and explain the social worlds.

But we noticed that this had had very little traction in the sociology of work. If we look at how emotions figure in scholarship on work, most influentially, it's based around things like emotional labour - so identifying emotions as basically a type of work. You know, you have to manage your emotions in order to function in many workplaces.

And there's also a lot of literature which does talk about emotions and affect as a consequence of working life. So for instance, if people suffer things like stress, mental health problems, sleep difficulties, family difficulties, as a result of, for instance, experiences of precarious work, there is scholarship on that.

But what there isn't, and what the kind of gap we were trying to address, was looking at how emotional and affective factors cause people to react to work in different ways - cause people to have different sort of orientations, attitudes, different expectations from working life.

And what we argue in the paper is that people's emotional and affective experiences in their sort of personal histories, have a big impact on what people want from working life as well, which we think is relatively new and something that people don't tend to talk about very much in sociology of work.

[00:03:02] **Vera:** Yeah, and the data we've drawn actually stems from a project that was on precarity of young workers and we did carry out biographical research. So we collected about 60 biographies with young workers in precarious working conditions. And the striking finding, which honestly we didn't expect to that extent was, how much the young people were suffering and not only suffering from the precarious working conditions, but how much suffering there was in their personal and private lives as well.

So the number of young people who were seeking consultancy, therapeutical help, the number of people suffering from mental health problems, the number of young people suffering from abuse were very sad, and very shocking. And we then became really interested in, to what extent do these experiences and emotional and affective states influence the way how the young people deal with their precarious work situation and more broadly their orientation towards work.

And it was absolutely fascinating when we tried to map the emotional histories of people with their work orientations and how much correspondence and relation there was according to if you had a rather cheerful and happy upbringing and made a lot of positive experiences in your emotional past, or if you were a person that had a lot of trauma and was suffering a lot and how this would shape completely different work orientations.

So what is biographical research? It is a qualitative approach in social sciences, where you talk to individuals and spend a lot of time with them. You don't have a really structured approach where you ask the same questions to everybody, but try to understand what has shaped people's lives.

So we were asking them very openly "how did you become the person you are right now?" And some people were struggling with this. And they said, "Hmm, that feels like talking to a therapist. I don't know what to say." And others really got into it and would talk to us for four or five hours, about their lives and what they think shaped their being.

And so we got narrations, where people talked, basically, we got everybody to talk about their lives in this kind of thinking, just narrating from themselves without us giving any guidance, what we want them to talk about what they considered relevant in their lives.

And after that, we had special questions that we were more interested in that were related around what do they expect from work? What do they think is good work? What do they think is a good life? We asked them if they have the power to change three things in their lives, what would they change? And we asked them about their perception of society, groups or classes in society, and where they position themselves in that hierarchy.

And we asked all those questions to everybody. So we got a good comparative picture of those perceptions as well. And so it's a very intimate process to have these biographies with people. And we did do in a really respectful manner and there was a good relationship building between us and them.

And a lot of people were even grateful after then saying that was a good experience to have this time to think about yourself and talk about yourself for so long. And then the analysis we did was also a very long process. We had lots of sessions for each interview. They lasted many hours as well and in some cases we spent a day or two discussing one interview.

And then the more we did this, the more we came up with patterns and similar things, in different people's lives, which we then tried to build up to a kind of typology, where we found similarities across the whole set of 60 biographies that we were analyzing.

Charles - what did we find out? Can you tell us a little bit about it?

[00:08:02] **Charles:** So the first thing we found out through this process of analysis, we identified four categories, if you like, four different types of work orientation. In other words, four different ways in which our participants viewed working life. So the first of these is what we called "workers normality", which is when participants looked at the workplace and they thought, "what I really want from work is a sense of regularity and stability. That is the main thing I value in work."

The next was a career orientation, which, I mean, people know what the word career means, but we're talking here about people who, when they look at working life, what they want is a kind of individually fulfilling career path, the sense that they are moving forward, both in terms of their material security, but also in terms of a kind of fulfilling career projects, which very much rewards them as an individual, materially as well as well as kind of, spiritually and affectively, if you like.

The third was what we called a bohemian orientation, which is where people wanted their work to provide them with kind of interesting creative projects, if you like, where they could sort of express themselves. So they explicitly disavowed kind of material reward. They said, "I don't really care about earning more money, making career progress. I just want to do projects that I find interesting."

And finally, we had what we called a "communitarian orientation", by that I mean people for whom working life should be an opportunity to build meaningful, reciprocal relationships with others, and to meaningfully benefits communities, whether that's through kind of altruistic actions, serving others, providing vital services, but ultimately why you see working life as a means of meaningfully supporting communities and building relationships.

So we identified these four orientations, and we noticed that the workers normality orientation, in other words, where people see work as a source of material stability, regularity, predictability, was almost entirely populated by people who had reported having very, very negative experiences in their childhood. So experiences of kind of abuse, family, breakup, dislocation, isolation, abandonment.

The people who had a career orientation were overwhelmingly people who reported, spoke very positively about their experiences as children, they felt like they'd always been surrounded by kind of supportive, nurturing relationships.

The other two - so the bohemian group and the communitarian group tended to be a lot more mixed. So the first finding was that people with a career orientation tended to have more stable, nurturing, supportive, affective, emotional backgrounds, and people who really valued work as a source of normality, predictability, regularity, had much more negative experiences in their background.

But the other groups were more mixed. So people with any kind of affective emotional family background could end up being bohemians or being communitarians.

[00:11:42] **Vera:** Charles - in the bohemian and communitarian groups, did it then make a difference what kind of affective biographies you had in terms of how successful you were in achieving your work orientation?

[00:11:58] **Charles:** Yes. So this was kind of the next phase of our analysis. And for each of these orientations, we identified a question, which essentially related to how successfully are the people kind of achieving what they want from work? So in the career case, we said, is this person on a sort of stable, progressive career pathway? In the workers normality orientation, we said, is this person successfully finding a sense of regularity and predictability in their work. In the bohemian orientation we said, is this person successfully finding projects that interest. And in the communitarian orientation we asked, is this person successfully managing to build reciprocal relationships and serve others through their work?

And yes, to put it very bluntly, those people who reported very stable, nurturing family backgrounds were more likely to be kind of successfully realizing the orientations they were persuing.

So if we look at the communitarian orientation, for example, we found that people who reported stable, nurturing relationships in their histories, were finding it more easy to build kind of stable networks of community at work, and people who didn't have that were finding it more difficult.

So the answer is yes - those affective background factors, we believe, make it easier or more difficult for people to kind of find what they want from working life.

[00:13:56] **Vera:** Yeah. Find what they want or even realize it. So it looks like, but we need to pay much more attention to those personal factors

Yeah, and maybe it's not only what they find in working life, but also how able they are to realize what they want from working life. So I think that just shows us that to understand the world of work, we really have to pay attention much more to the neglected side of work. That seems to be just in the reproductive sphere, but which actually, has to tell us much more around how working life has changed.

[00:14:39] **Charles:** So, yeah, I think to conclude what these findings suggest to us is that people studying working life from a critical perspective, sociologists of work, need to pay more attention to how people's working lives are shaped by affective factors in their backgrounds, which we think is something that's been neglected.

Too often emotions affect have been treated as an outcome of working life. If you have precarious, insecure working life, you'll be stressed, you'll have family problems. But not necessarily the other way round looking at the causalities in the other direction. So I think that's really the main sort of headline finding from this research.

So thanks very much for listening. We hope you found it interesting.

[00:15:22] **Vera:** Thanks. Bye-bye