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Critical reflection and critical reflexivity as core processes for critical WOP

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Critical reflection and critical reflexivity as core processes for critical WOP: Precarious employment as an example

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Abstract

This work suggests that researchers in work and organizational psychology (WOP) and WOP as a discipline would benefit from a critical perspective on their own research and practice. We highlight the value of critical reflection and critical reflexivity on contexts of research and practice in order to increase the practical impact of WOP for everyone. First, we outline how WOP currently fails to address pressing global issues, such as precarious employment, by focusing on work-related phenomena in affluent societies and neglecting issues relevant to the majority of the world's working population. Second, we present a heuristic framework of four fundamental contextual components that are important to consider when engaging in a continuous process of critical reflection and critical reflexivity: history; economy and politics; society and culture; and personal background. Third, we illustrate why these contexts are important for WOP with the example of precarious employment. Considering context more explicitly is

important for future WOP research because context not only co-determines the experiences of the working people under investigation but also the subjectivity of researchers themselves. We hope to encourage WOP researchers to engage in critical reflection and critical reflexivity to promote a more critical WOP.

KEYWORDS
context, critical reflection, critical reflexivity, critical WOP, precarious employment

INTRODUCTION

Conducting research in work and organizational psychology (WOP) and implementing insights into practice in a non-reflective and non-reflexive manner risks unilaterally serving corporate agendas at the expense of workers' legitimate interests. For example, idiosyncratic deals, a concept of employee-oriented workplace flexibility, were originally described as a powerful tool for employees to negotiate individually beneficial work arrangements. However, asymmetric power relations between employer and employee (as discussed in the context of the psychological contract by Shanahan & Smith, 2021) and ideological contexts (Hornung & Höge, 2019) are largely ignored, facilitating the abuse of idiosyncratic deals to predominantly serve economic goals. In this article, we focus on how WOP could benefit from a critical perspective on its own research and practice. We highlight the value of engaging in two distinct but related processes: critical reflection and critical reflexivity. We regard critical reflection "as a process of examining assumptions (i.e., individual and social beliefs and values) and power relations, and how these assumptions and relations shape practice" (Ng et al., 2019, pp. 1122–1123). We emphasize the importance of critical reflection on contexts in which a phenomenon occurs and how such contexts are then in turn important for critical reflection itself. In doing so, we highlight the nature of critical reflection as a continuous, reflexive process. However, critical reflection on research and practice is insufficient without concurrently engaging in critical reflexivity, which is "a process of recognizing one's own position in the world in order both to better understand the limitations of one's own knowing and to better appreciate the social realities of others" (Ng et al., 2019, p. 1124). Throughout this paper, we draw out the differences between these two processes, arguing that they are key competencies for critical WOP researchers. In doing so, we hope to stimulate critical thinking within WOP because to date critical perspectives have been relatively absent from this field (Gerard, 2016).

Although 85% of the world's employment is in emerging and developing countries (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018), workers in the informal sector and those from emerging and developing countries are underrepresented in WOP research (Bergman & Jean, 2016; Lefkowitz, 2016). The key aims of critical WOP are to highlight such disparities and draw attention to the important human concerns of the global working population, as well as work-related phenomena that are underrepresented and not traditionally discussed.

To demonstrate the importance of critical reflection and critical reflexivity for critical WOP, we apply these processes to the concept of precarious employment (PE), which has received relatively little attention in WOP research, although it is an important global work-related phenomenon (Betti, 2018). Precarity is associated with insecurity and the absence of protection or a regulating mechanism. The term precarity has itself been subject to criticism (Han, 2018), with some authors suggesting focusing on precarization as a process, comprising objective conditions and heterogeneous experiences of insecure employment (Alberti et al., 2018). We highlight the embeddedness of PE in historical, economic-political, sociocultural, and personal contexts, and identify such contexts as important contributors to subjective work experiences. As such, we align with Teo (2015, p. 245): "individual subjectivity is embedded in social, cultural, and historical contexts. ... [Hence] society, culture, and history are interwoven with the very fabric of subjectivity."

The paper is organized as follows: First, we present critical reflection as a valuable tool for drawing out biases in research and practice. We also point to the influence of sociocultural history and work–life experiences as a WOP researcher and how this can influence research, as well as how critical reflexivity is an important tool for identifying this. Second, we interrogate PE through a process of critical reflection, where we delineate the embeddedness of extant research on PE in its *historical*, *economic-political*, and *sociocultural context*, as well as *personal backgrounds*. In doing so, we demonstrate how historical developments, global hegemonies, specific economic and political backgrounds, underlying ideologies, societal and cultural backgrounds (such as values and beliefs), and different individual conditions (e.g., gender, age, and migration background) have played a role in shaping dominant conceptualizations of PE and how these conceptualizations may, as a result, be incomplete. Thus, we emphasize why, for PE, the examination of objective characteristics (such as employment contracts, working hours, or wage levels) must relate to the contextual configuration of workers' life situations and biographies, which then determines subjective experiences of work-related precariousness. Complementing critical reflection, we then illustrate critical reflexivity by evaluating the role of our own socioeconomic and sociocultural histories in shaping our discussion of PE and in selecting it as an example in the first place. We conclude by outlining some further suggestions, which may help work and organizational psychologists to engage in critical scholarship and shed light on unquestioned assumptions and prerequisites for traditional perspectives on WOP.

A CRITICAL APPROACH TO WOP

Traditional approaches to WOP focus on salaried, core, managerial, professional, and executive employees (Bergman & Jean, 2016). At best, such a focus risks inadequately defining the experiences of the (many) members of the labor market who do not fit these categories and focusing only on a subset of the workforce and/or specific outcome variables (such as performance) possibly leading to a fundamental misunderstanding of important work-related phenomena (Bal, 2020; Symon & Cassell, 2006). At worst, our discipline risks offering incomplete evidence to decision makers and the research being used to justify policies that promote inequality (e.g., Lefkowitz, 2008). Therefore, critical approaches are necessary.

According to the ILO (2015), only five out of 10 workers globally are in waged and salaried employment. More than 60% of the worlds' working population work in the informal sector—characterized by precarity and a lack of labor rights, social protection, and decent working conditions—which is disproportionately overrepresented in developing and emerging

economies, where 93% of informal employment is located (ILO, 2018). Although some scholars have discussed the reasons for this misrepresentation (see Lefkowitz, 2016 for a brief review), there is increasing momentum in refusing to accept such justification and thus uphold the status quo, instead viewing them as obstacles to be addressed and overcome to build a more inclusive WOP (McWhirter & McWha-Hermann, 2021).

There are at least three important critiques of WOP that offer a promising foundation on which to build further critical discussion. First is the need to examine any ideological premises (e.g., neoliberalism and meritocracy) underpinning WOP and their influence on research and practice (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Dóci & Bal, 2018). Importantly, although we mainly discuss neoliberalism here, any ideological premise can be problematic. Failing to critically consider ideologies, especially to note and question their implicit assumptions, may lead individuals to support theories, policies, and practices on false or incomplete grounds. Therefore, recognition of the implicit existence of ideology underpinning knowledge is important. Second is a need for greater awareness of global power relations, the predominance of a Western perspective, and the global interconnectedness of organizational actions (Gloss et al., 2017). Third is a careful interrogation of the traditional focus on performance and well-being as outcome variables in WOP research against other pressing global issues such as climate change, social injustice, racism, and inequality (Bal, 2020). Ignoring these dynamics by focusing on certain contexts or concepts only risks unintended consequences; a critical approach to WOP can therefore be valuable for drawing out hidden assumptions and blind spots. A critical lens can help uncover how such blind spots within scientific research influence scientific discourse and the practical impact of research in WOP.

Critical consideration of sociocultural and economic-political contexts may draw out unquestioned assumptions and prerequisites for WOP in research and practice. It is important to be aware of the context in which WOP investigates work-related issues, and work-related concepts and work design models are developed (i.e., Global North, Western capitalist, individualist culture and society, and formal economy). The applicability of well-established concepts and models to differing contexts (e.g., Global South, socialism, collectivist culture, and informal economy) should be examined. The focus of WOP on certain topics and contexts risks inaccurately representing the global working population. Gloss et al. (2017) argue that the WOP perspective is biased toward professionals with Official jobs in the formal economy, who are Safe from discrimination, and live in High-income countries (POSH) and in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies. Islam and Sanderson (2021) outline how WOP obscures underlying (institutional, social, relational, intersubjective, collective, etc.) processes by referring to heuristic categories: scientism (emphasis on empirical positivism and quantitative methodology against other philosophies of science and qualitative methodology), individualism (focus on individuals while neglecting social, political, and economic contexts), managerialism (research focus on managers and other powerful individuals against workers' interests), neoliberalism/capitalism (ideological influences on the research through political, social, and fantasmatic logics), and hegemony (geographic asymmetry whereby WOP is concentrated in the Global North). While striving to be objective and value-free, WOP research fails to recognize and acknowledge its underlying values (Lefkowitz, 2008), reflected in who and what is studied. Critical WOP scholars have identified how neoliberal ideology guides action (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Dóci & Bal, 2018), which in turn risks the discipline unintentionally serving as "handmaidens to capitalism" (Gerard, 2017, p. 413).

A critical reflection on context also requires recognition of continuous interaction between the individual, group, societal, and disciplinary levels, recognizing the need for a system-type

approach. Researchers should take a global and local perspective to their work, for example, considering what happens in a global economic system when labor and social legislation in Western societies obliges employers to provide more secure employment conditions. Such pressures may lead employers to increasingly outsource jobs to less-regulated economies, shifting the problem to a different geographical context. The jobs created in less regulated (generally non-Western) economies are often characterized by low wages and a lack of protection, ultimately enabling the exploitation of workers who already live in challenging conditions. By promoting secure employment in Western societies, we may simultaneously risk fostering inequality, oppression, and exploitation in the Global South and for marginalized groups in Western capitalist societies: "ultimately, it is this global market system that determines not only the distribution of wealth but also how wealth is often achieved at the expense of another's poverty" (Gerard, 2016, p. 410). A global perspective is also important to avoid universalization of Western contexts, which over- or underestimate the novelty and relevance of work-related phenomena. For example, PE was only researched and presented as a new work-related phenomenon when insecurity also increased in the Global North, despite PE having long been pervasive in the Global South (Betti, 2018).

Some scholars have already begun to argue for engagement with global issues, such as reduction of poverty, inequality, and exploitation. Such scholars argue for the importance of humanitarian work psychology (McWha-Hermann et al., 2015), psychology of working theory (Duffy et al., 2016), social justice (McWhirter & McWha-Hermann, 2021), marginalized and vulnerable workers (Reichman, 2014), contextualizing WOP (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2017), and a broader consideration of values (Lefkowitz, 2008) and outcomes (Bal, 2020). While important, to date, this work has been rather piecemeal. Critical WOP offers the potential to synergize efforts, for example, through initiatives such as the Future of Work and Organizational Psychology (FoWOP) and the Global Organisation for Humanitarian Work Psychology (GOHWP).

CRITICAL REFLECTION: A KEY PROCESS FOR CRITICAL WOP

The value of critical consideration of WOP can be seen in the application of a process of critical reflection. According to Fook and Askeland (2007), critical reflection "involves the identification of deep-seated assumptions, but with the primary purpose of bringing about some improvements in professional practice ... [that] incorporate an understanding of personal experiences within social, cultural and structural contexts" (pp. 521–522). Critical reflection requires explicit consideration of contextual issues that may render one's own research beneficial or detrimental to certain individuals or groups or susceptible to being misused for unintended purposes (such as ideology, power, and hegemony). Building on Johns (2006) and Teo (2015), who emphasize the importance of context for behavior, subjectivity, and mental life, we present critical reflection as a helpful tool for drawing out implicit assumptions across different contexts.

In accordance with Teo (2015), we assume society, culture, and history to be important context factors that both influence and are influenced by human subjectivity. In a similar vein, a special issue on informal and precarious work in the Global South has compiled case studies suggesting that precarious work should be studied in its embeddedness in historical, political, and social contexts (Hammer & Ness, 2021). Islam's (2020) multilevel framework for analysis of psychological phenomena in the context of business ethics suggests different mechanisms explaining how economic, political, and sociocultural contexts affect the individual, which can

also be used to distinguish these contexts. The sociocultural context operates through normative expectations and aspirations, the economic context through incentive structures, and the political context through hierarchy and sanction systems.

Each of the three works mentioned above suggests differing but overlapping sets of contexts. In constructing our framework grounded in these works, we used insights from our own research on PE (e.g., Hopfgartner et al., 2022; Seubert et al., 2021) to inductively guide the selection of components. We decided to primarily draw on Islam (2020) because of the clearly outlined mechanisms through which the contexts operate. However, to align with Teo (2015) and Hammer and Ness (2021), we deviated from Islam (2020) in two ways. First, we distinguished a separate historical context, which is in line with Hammer and Ness (2021) and Teo (2015). However, we agree with Islam (2020) that the historical context affects the individual through socio-historical identity formation (an aspect that Islam, 2020, locates in the sociocultural context). Second, we merged the political and economic context into a combined context that comprises economy and politics, affecting the individual through incentive and sanction structures within hierarchies.

By integrating Hammer and Ness (2021), Islam (2020), and Teo (2015), we arrived at a heuristic framework that identifies four components central to applying critical reflection to WOP contexts: history; economy and politics; society and culture; and personal background. We present the components in Figure 1 as a continuous and iterative process to illustrate the importance of critical reflection on each component.
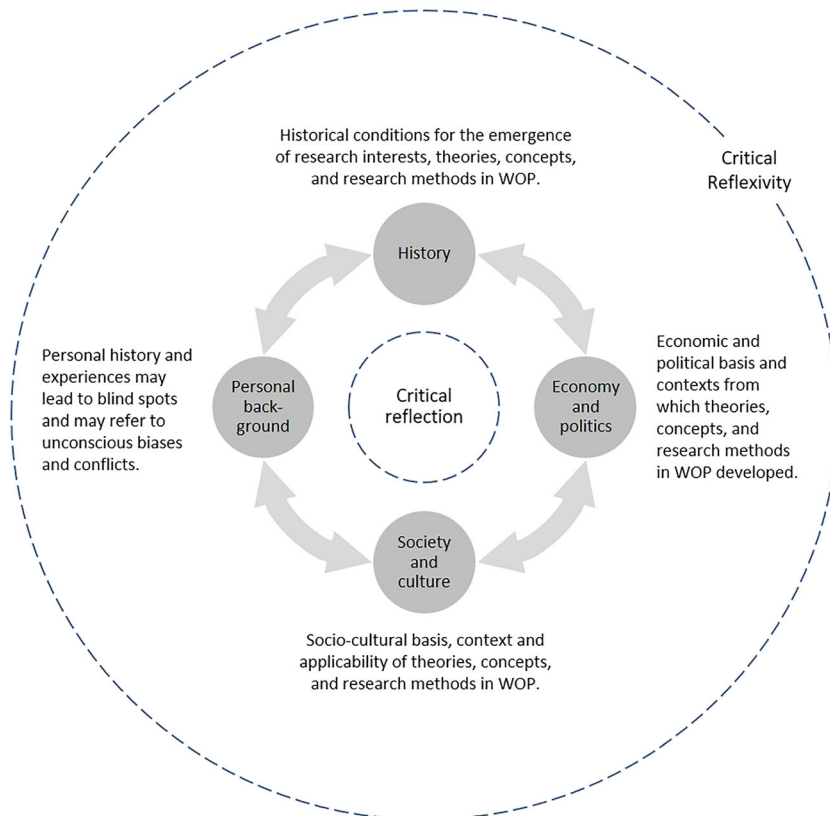

FIGURE 1 Contextual components of a critical reflexivity and critical reflection process for WOP

First, a critical examination of the historical context in which certain research traditions have emerged is necessary for understanding historical embeddedness and the background of concepts, theories, methods, etc. For example, the job characteristics model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) was developed in the Western context of the 1960s where secure and stable jobs were guaranteed (for white privileged men) and division of labor between men (formal employment) and women (informal and domestic work) was the norm (Betti, 2018). However, this was only the case in Western industrialized and affluent societies. Second, critical examination of the economic and political contexts in which concepts and theories have been developed is therefore necessary to establish the global applicability of work-related phenomena and the appropriateness of using them in other contexts. Uncovering and identifying underlying ideologies, values, and beliefs that accompany specific economic and political conditions (e.g., neoliberal ideology and meritocratic beliefs) may also prevent potential misuse of research in WOP to justify global inequality and poverty (for examples of such misuse, see Lefkowitz, 2008). Third, alongside the historic and economic/political context are societal and cultural parameters influencing how individuals experience work, because social background and cultural norms co-determine the way individuals perceive, evaluate, and experience specific situations at work and beyond. Finally, individual characteristics (e.g., gender, age, and ethnicity) and experiences (e.g., discrimination, oppression)—which we refer to as personal background—are both influenced by the aforementioned contexts and influence subjective experiences of work and life on their own.

FROM CRITICAL REFLECTION TO CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY

Importantly, researchers' own histories, biographies, and personalities (our values, beliefs, assumptions, and wishes) inevitably influence how we experience the world and interpret our findings. Hence, the process of critical reflection should be extended to a second process of critical reflexivity, which focuses on the individual researchers themselves. Critical reflexivity is "the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome" (Berger, 2015, p. 220). Although critical reflection and critical reflexivity are often conflated in the literature (Mann, 2016), we consider them two distinct concepts, where the centrality of self-awareness is key to reflexivity. Bolton and Delderfield (2018) provide a helpful discussion of the differences: Reflection is an in-depth review of events from as many perspectives as possible to gain new insights (e.g., seemingly unimportant details turn out to be significant and vice versa), whereas reflexivity entails questioning our attitudes, values, behavior, etc., to understand how these aspects might manifest structural problems (e.g., marginalize or exclude individuals).

Critical reflexivity is a crucial component of critical WOP because our interest and engagement with research topics (and/or social movements) is heavily influenced by our own social and cultural contexts and may reflect unconscious wishes or conflicts. This is one of the most difficult challenges for (critical) work and organizational psychologists, as it requires a meta-perspective on our own worldview, including beliefs, assumptions, and values embedded in the sociocultural structures in which we live and work (Ng et al., 2019). Our worldview is influenced by blind spots and/or the repression of our own sociocultural history; therefore, deep and lifelong critical reflexivity, including consistent confrontation of oneself and one's unconscious, is needed. The implications of critical reflexivity in the long-term are multilevel,

including personal development and growth (e.g., Fromm, 1976), a change of the system (e.g., structures and institutions), and a redefinition of "norms" (Ng et al., 2019). Hence, critical reflexivity not only benefits researchers but also the discipline by broadening insights and knowledge, which impacts societal structures, norms, and values.

Reflexivity and developmental approaches are key components of be (com)ing a reflexive researcher (Attia & Edge, 2017). Reflexivity comprises two interacting aspects: prospective, the effect of the researcher on the research, and retrospective, the effect of the research on the researcher, that refer to a continuous interrelation between researcher and research (Attia & Edge, 2017). A developmental approach refers to growing (self-)awareness of this interaction (Attia & Edge, 2017). The focus on self-awareness is a key element of reflexivity (Mann, 2016). As Attia and Edge (2017) outline, personal backgrounds such as professional history, relationships, and aspirations influence which research topics we choose, which research questions and designs we investigate, and which methods and approaches we apply (prospective reflexivity). Engagement in research also influences the researcher's self, which promotes personal development (retrospective reflexivity).

PE AS AN ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

To illustrate how critical reflection and critical reflexivity can be applied within WOP, we use PE as an example. We argue that PE is typically mis-conceptualized as a universalized concept, where existing and new scientific knowledge is applicable to all who experience it. Throughout this section, we use critical reflection to examine contextual configurations of the four components in our model, demonstrating how particular histories, economies and politics, society and cultures, and personal backgrounds have influenced how it has been studied and therefore who extant knowledge is (and is not) relevant and applicable to (and for). Although we present each component independently, they cannot be considered truly independent; instead, they are intertwined and mutually influencing each other, which makes critical reflection even more challenging. Moreover, although all four components affect each other, the interaction between the contexts of history, economy and politics, and society and culture, on the one side, and personal background, on the other, stands out, because it is these interactions that connect the individual with the greater whole and thereby shape life experiences, individual values, and unconscious beliefs, which in turn co-determine subjective experiences of work-related phenomena, such as PE. Recognizing the importance of researcher characteristics in the research process, we extend the process of critical reflection to critical reflexivity, where we draw on our own experiences of precarity and how this has impacted writing the current paper, and vice versa.

SITUATING PE WITHIN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Reflection on PE historically uncovers the Northern-centrism that is inherent in many of its concepts, which fail to acknowledge the global pervasiveness of PE, effectively defining the precarious lives of those outside the Global North as normal. The discourse on precarity as an empirical phenomenon became prominent in the 1980s in Western Europe due to the rise of atypical employment, the erosion of standard employment relationships (SER), and the depletion of welfare systems since the 1970s in the Global North (Suliman & Weber, 2019). Though the term had been used in the 19th century, the conceptualization familiar to Western

capitalism emerged in the postwar period between the 1950s and 1970s in affluent Western society (Betti, 2018). From 2000, the term became popular even in public debates, for example, in discussions about the gig economy and zero-hour contracts (Muntaner, 2018).

One of the most important critiques of how PE has been conceptualized, at least for our argument here, is its underlying Northern-centrism (Betti, 2018), which fails to recognize its history. Current conceptualizations of PE position precarity as a new phenomenon and, in doing so, risk reproduction of global hierarchies of development (Han, 2018) and triggering problematic notions of class (Alberti et al., 2018). Within the mainstream debate on the precarity concept, there is little awareness that precarious work has always been the norm in the Global South, whereas social welfare systems and stable jobs, especially in Western Europe, could only be realized on the back of unpaid housework (predominantly by women) and labor exploitation in the colonies (Suliman & Weber, 2019).

Historical engagement with PE from a Northern-centric perspective has failed to acknowledge PE as a global phenomenon and risks reproducing global hegemonies and hierarchies. However, critically reflecting on different disciplines and perspectives (e.g., from outside the Global North) could shift the (societal and scientific) discourse and help to overcome Northern-centrism. Therefore, a critical lens on the historical context may not only offer new perspectives but also contribute to overcoming global injustices, inequalities, and power relations by understanding and acknowledging the impact of colonialism up to the present on economies, politics, societies, cultures, and individuals.

EMBEDDEDNESS OF PE IN THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Concepts of work-related phenomena are conceived in a specific milieu of economic and political conditions. As such conditions are temporally and geographically volatile, concepts must be continuously adapted to specific contexts. The debate on PE in the Global North started with the demise of so-called Fordism and the start of post-Fordism in Western capitalism. Although there is agreement in the scientific discourse that significant changes restructured the economy in the 1980s, this has been analyzed and discussed very differently (see Burrows et al., 1992). To reflect on the embeddedness of PE in economic and political contexts, we draw upon Fordism and post-Fordism, as critically outlined by Jessop (1992). Fordism is entangled with the emergence of a strong welfare state that introduced many regulations for social security. It became a political and policymaker motto that workers were cared for throughout their entire (working) life. The SER, characterized by permanent full-time employment with full integration into social provisions (Kalleberg, 2000), was considered as "standard" during Fordism. Most workers aspired to this ideal, although due to labor distribution (formal employment for men, informal and domestic work for women), usually only white men were privileged to enjoy the benefits of SER, even in Western societies (Betti, 2018).

The 1970s marked a crisis of Fordism (Burrows et al., 1992) and the beginning of a new economic and political era (post-Fordism) that promoted a neoliberal ideology. Although proponents of neoliberalism claim that the greatest possible freedom of the market leads to more prosperity for all, data suggest that in most developed countries, income inequality has grown, and about 66% of the world's population live in countries with increased inequality (United Nations, 2020). Neoliberalism led to insecure and unstable employment relationships that provide less social protection, contributing to growing inequalities (ILO, 2015).

The growth of neoliberalism from the 1970s onward, when many Western governments started privatizing the public sector, deregulating financial markets, and reducing social security systems (Springveld, 2017), also led to a decline of formerly secure jobs and an increase of PE in the Global North. The familiar premises of neoliberalism (liberalism, free markets, and competition), which are inherent to economic and political systems around the globe today, meant many workers struggling against one another and a rise in work-related precariousness. However, important aspects of the employment relationship (such as wage levels and social protection coverage) are not systematically investigated in research into WOP, and aspects of the employment contract (e.g., working hours per week) are often only used as control variables, which means "'controlling away' context rather than assessing its impact empirically" (Johns, 2006, p. 389). Nonetheless, some research on job insecurity—a prominent element of PE—has investigated contextual aspects (e.g., Sverke et al., 2019) and found that perceived job insecurity depends on economic (e.g., labor market conditions) and political contexts (e.g., national welfare interventions, countries' social safety net, union density). More research is needed that focuses on the psychological mechanisms of job insecurity, new forms of labor contracts, and nations with different social security systems (Schaufeli, 2016).

Critical reflection on the economic and political context in which WOP itself emerged highlights the period of industrial capitalism and notes that many prominent WOP theories and concepts were developed against the backdrop of Fordism. Although there have been many economic and political opportunities since then, many theories and concepts are still applied by WOP researchers and practitioners without challenging the prerequisites and underlying assumptions on which they were built (e.g., stable and secure employment and social security systems). This tendency within the discipline more generally could also be a reason why PE—although an important issue for the global working population—has been largely overlooked in WOP research and practice to date.

SOCIETY AND CULTURE AFFECT THE EXPERIENCE OF WORK-RELATED PRECARIOUSNESS

Social and cultural expectations and aspirations are shaped by latent beliefs based on mutually appreciated values, motives, and behaviors, the evaluation of self and others, and the kind of job one has. The underlying ideology, such as neoliberalism, is interwoven with economic and political context but also embedded in society and culture. Consequently, ideology influences and determines not only (work–)life in a specific society and geographical context but also the way people think about the world they live in, the economic system, society as a whole, the self, and the way they act (Fromm, 1976). The Fordist era in Western societies not only significantly changed the way of working but also the social and cultural life in which it occurred. The introduction of formal labor contracts, minimum wage, and labor protection and rights that generally improved the (work–)life situation for the working population in the Global North, leading to a collective view of the SER as the gold standard. Although the rise of neoliberalism, which promotes the proliferation of atypical and insecure employment, no longer sustains the premise of SER, many people in the Global North still strive for secure and stable employment, not only to secure a living but also for psychosocial reasons. In the following, we highlight the effect of PE on the development and maintenance of people's social identity against a specific societal and cultural background (in this case the Global North), which is closely linked to its economic-political context.

Work is an important source of social identity, which in part determines who people are and assigns their place in society (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Famous studies of the unemployed in Marienthal in the 1930s showed the significance of social and psychological mechanisms of employment, identifying the latent benefits of work (Jahoda, 1981). The proliferation of PE may jeopardize these benefits because such employment situations generally offer less social status, belonging, purpose, structure, and activity.

Meritocratic beliefs align neoliberal perspectives, ascribing PE to the lack of individual effort and disregarding economic and political influences, making global inequality a social phenomenon in which unequal distribution of wealth and power is justified (Mrozowicki & Trappmann, 2020). The attribution of PE to individual failure is one reason why PE tends to align with low social status, recognition, and problems with the formation of a socially constructed identity based on a work role (Nye & Roberts, 2019).

Atypically or precariously employed and jobless individuals may be seen by the majority as members of the out-group with less recognition and social status than people in SER. Indeed, research has found evidence that job insecurity harms a person's social identity, which has implications for identity formation under (and impacted by) atypical or PE situations (Selenko et al., 2018). According to the neo-socioanalytic model of personality (Nye & Roberts, 2019), the work role interacts with two primary aspects of personality—personal identity (perspective of the self) and reputation (others' perspective of the self)—and these relationships are synergistically moderated by social investment in the work role. As the unfavorable structural conditions of PE likely hinder long-term investment in the work role, this may bar precariously employed workers from tapping into a vital source of identity and reputation (Nye & Roberts, 2019).

Manstead (2018) introduces an integrative model of how material conditions (economic, social, and cultural) and perceptions of social rank (working class vs. middle class) affect social cognition and behavior, which is potentially moderated by ideology and inequality as well as economic threat.

In summary, ideology and its underlying premises (such as meritocratic beliefs) are co-determinants for sociocultural contexts that are crucial to the perception and evaluation of our individual work and life situations, including socially constructed identity. The prominence of neoliberal ideology in traditional WOP has influenced research and practice (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Dóci & Bal, 2018), including research on precariousness. Society and societal norms (such as the belief that the SER is "normal") and culture and cultural values impact subjective experiences of work-related precariousness. Positioning work-related phenomena within the social and cultural context in which they occur is crucial for understanding them and for understanding how they influence the individual.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND IS SUBJECTIVELY AND MATERIALLY COMPLEX, BUT KEY TO UNDERSTANDING WORK-RELATED PRECARIOUSNESS

Personal background connects any context to the self and mirrors it in individual life. History, economy and politics, society, and culture co-determine the context of personal background (e.g., biography, opportunities, aspirations, wishes, values, and [unconscious] beliefs). Personal background stands out from these four components because it not only exerts a direct influence on subjective experiences of work-related precariousness but also moderates the influence of the remaining components on this experience. The relevance of specific historical, economic-

political, and sociocultural contexts to an individual's background determines whether and how contexts play a role in the subjective experience of work-related precariousness. Importantly, focusing on subjective experience alone, rather than including material conditions, can sometimes be a vector of neoliberal individualization within WOP (see Shanahan & Smith, 2021), making individuals' unfavorable work situation appear their own responsibility only. Therefore, researchers should always study subjective experiences of work-related precariousness in connection with the underlying social and economic circumstances (e.g., lack of alternatives in the labor market and lack of labor law protection and/or social security systems). Considering personal background, Kraemer (2008) suggests distinguishing between three levels of analysis that are important for subjective experiences of work-related precariousness: whole life situation (context of household, e.g., family background, financial circumstances, and main/supplementary wage earners), employment biography (former employment situations, duration and number of periods of unemployment), and current employment situation (e.g., formal/informal, secure/insecure, permanent/temporary employment, sufficient/insufficient wage level, integration/disintegration in labor and social regulations, and integration/disintegration in social networks at work).

Positioning PE within this broader personal context is important for understanding the subjective experience of precariousness. For example, young well-educated people from affluent family backgrounds who work in jobs that may objectively be considered precarious (i.e., part-time work with fixed-term contracts, low wage level, few/no social security benefits, and less application of labor/social regulations) may experience less or no subjective work-related precariousness due to their background. On the other hand, people whose current employment situation might objectively not be considered precarious (i.e., full-time employment with open-end contracts and integration in social security systems and labor/social regulations) but who have an unstable employment biography (i.e., several and/or long periods of unemployment) and/or find themselves in precarious life situations (e.g., financial responsibility for their family and/or financially supporting relatives, in debt, no savings) may subjectively experience higher levels of work-related precariousness. Supporting the importance of personal context, a study in Korea found that household income had a moderating effect on the association between PE and suicidal ideation (Han et al., 2017).

Personal context (e.g., age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, migration background, experiences of marginalization, and level of education) should also not to be underestimated in the experience of work-related phenomena. Individual aspects, such as gender, age, and level of education, are risk or protective factors for being exposed to PE. Feminist scholars have argued that women in industrial capitalist societies are more often employed in insecure and unstable jobs, excluding them from social security benefits, which is why they experience a higher level of precariousness then men (Lorey, 2015). Indeed, although young age, low level of qualification, and gender are risk factors (about 50% of women and 39% of men between 20 and 24 years work in precarious jobs in the European Union), women with low and medium qualifications are at high risk of precariousness for their whole working life (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017).

Migration background is another important factor for experiences of PE. Migrant labor division is prominent in capitalist countries and cities in the Global North, where migrants mainly work in low-paid jobs as cleaners, care workers, restaurant workers, etc. (Lewis et al., 2015). As Lewis et al. (2015, p. 582) outline, migrants are at particular risk of PE "at the bottom end of labor markets in Western economies," which sometimes implies forced labor and exploitation.

In summary, specific personal backgrounds (e.g., female gender, young age, migration background, and low level of education) are risk factors for being exposed to work-related phenomena such as PE. Personal background also co-determines subjective experiences of work-related phenomena. Although substantial literature already exists on individual differences at work, it is important not to use such knowledge to "control away" effects (Johns, 2006). Instead, personal background factors and combinations thereof should be studied systematically considering their interaction with other (historical, economic-political, and sociocultural) contextual elements in shaping work-related experiences. Furthermore, as individuals are the experts on their personal background, their expertise should be valued and incorporated more explicitly into research. Therefore, it is important to analyze subjective experiences of PE in relation to life situation, (employment) biography, and current employment situation in a way that acknowledges the expertise of the subjects. The context of when (history) and how (economy and politics, society, and culture) an individual grows up and lives influences and co-determines personal background (individual biography and life experiences), which finds its expression in subjectivity, including (unconscious) wishes, individual beliefs, values, and aspirations. This is important to understand why similar objective employment characteristics are experienced differently depending on context.

SITUATING OURSELVES: CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY OF PE

Drawing together the four components of our proposed process of critical reflection shows how contextualized extant conceptualizations of PE are and how existing knowledge cannot (and should not) be taken as universally relevant and applicable. We used PE here to illustrate how previous research in WOP has been limited by these contextual constraints in its consideration of work-related phenomena and to emphasize the importance of making these contexts explicit in order to more fully understand the nature of psychological concepts. A critical WOP process that engages in critical reflection can help to understand and investigate psychological and social phenomena more fully. However, in selecting PE as our example, and in shaping our discussion of it, we must recognize the role that our own socioeconomic and sociocultural histories have played, and the importance of recognizing and making explicit these histories through the process of critical reflexivity. Critical reflexivity is characterized by self-awareness, internal dialogue, and critical self-evaluation. The reflexivity we present here is a combination of the authors' experiences related to PE; it reflects how PE was chosen as the topic (prospective reflexivity) and how it in turn has influenced our thinking over time (retrospective reflexivity). After illustrating prospective and retrospective aspects of our research on PE, we move to a self-reflexive process on the four components (history, economy and politics, society and culture, personal background), which situates us in relation to PE and may help others to engage in reflexivity themselves.

Regarding prospective and retrospective reflexivity, our own experiences with precarity in academia certainly played an important role in our interest in PE as a research topic in and out of academia. As a basis for our own research on PE, we build on sociological, multidimensional research on PE that originated in the Western context, which should be considered a limitation in a global perspective. As all of us live and work in Western contexts in the Global North, our framework proved helpful for our research purpose. Nonetheless, studying PE quantitatively and qualitatively in different occupations and industries in Western contexts has strengthened our awareness of the complexity of PE, even from a Western (non-global) perspective. By

discussing our understanding of PE with organizational researchers from the Global South, we gained interesting insights into non-Western contexts, opening a more global perspective on PE, which helped shed light on some of our blind spots. We are currently planning cooperations and studies on PE with colleagues from and in different countries around the globe that will not only improve our understanding of PE as a pervasive, global work-related phenomenon but also our professional and personal development.

In the process of writing this paper, we took a deeper look at ourselves and reflected on our positions as researchers. In particular, the thoughtful comments of the reviewers not only helped to improve the paper but also stimulated an evolving (silent) dialogue with the reviewers within us that led us to new insights and revealed some of our blind spots, for which we are grateful. In the following, we provide personal insights on the four components (history, economy and politics, society and culture, personal background), where we situate ourselves in relation to PE. As academics, we have all experienced precarity in some form in our working lives (some ongoing). We all feel these experiences have been foundational to our experiences of work and drive our desire to study PE. Academic precarization is characterized by competition, managerial control, performance pressure, and scientists being affected by PE themselves (Rogler, 2019). Our *histories* are different, but we share experiences of the male breadwinner model growing up, with a father in SER and a mother working part-time. Our shared understanding of work and life is therefore one in which money was not plentiful, but it was sufficient, and education was considered important.

Economically and politically, we grew up in neoliberal, capitalist systems, where competition was "normal," and high achievements were prized as a sign of diligence. We were brought up to value hard work, which would bring financial reward. Such meritocratic beliefs remain deeply embedded *socially and culturally*, and indeed may be reinforced in our roles as academics, working in a system of meritocracy. Although these beliefs provide goals and dreams, they can fuel unhealthy work habits based on the idea that working harder means achieving more. Such habits are exacerbated by working in conditions of precarity. Two of the authors work part-time, two on a fixed-term contract, one with qualification requirements to obtain a permanent contract, but all admit to working far beyond their paid working hours. We justify this because we feel our work is helping create a better world, but we must also reflect on our deeply embedded sociocultural experiences to understand our reasons for this.

Through recent studies and engagement with other scholars, we have begun to understand the connectedness of global inequality with our own actions and how our consumer decisions in our home country have implications for those in other countries. We feel compelled to bring this to the attention of others, certain that drawing out the interconnectedness of global inequality will help address it, that if others can understand the role of history, political and economic contexts, social and cultural contexts, and personal background, in shaping their beliefs, they too will be compelled to take action. So, while we try to build objective arguments, our choice of PE reflects our goal to shift the status quo of global inequality.

In terms of *personal background*, we are not from marginalized or stigmatized groups, though the women among us certainly experience more precarity than the men. We are all well educated, and relatively privileged, making us feel responsible, but also leading to concerns about white saviorism and fears of inadvertently supporting the systems we work in, which support PE and inequality (e.g., by working more than contractually agreed because we want to achieve something and are intrinsically motivated). This awareness is a first step to changing our own values and beliefs and in the long run hopefully also the system.

CONCLUSION

The changing nature of work, and mobilization around global inequality, demands that, as a discipline, WOP engages in actively addressing the largely unquestioned reliance on capitalism and neoliberalism, reflecting on our implicit assumptions, and addressing our research aims and goals for humanization of work for all workers. First, reflecting on the history of work-related phenomena, such as PE, is important to understand when, where, why, and how the phenomenon emerged. Second, reflecting on the embeddedness of PE in specific economic and political systems reveals conditions under which work-related phenomena arose; hence, interrogating economic-political contexts is crucial for understanding underlying ideologies, power relations, and social injustices in a globalized world. Third, reflecting on contexts of society and culture is important in understanding issues such as socioeconomic background, cultural values, and social structures that influence work-related phenomenon such as PE. Fourth, personal backgrounds (e.g., age, gender, family background, and biography) influence how we subjectively experience work-related phenomena, in this case PE. Continuously reflecting and considering contextual configurations of work-related phenomena, such as PE, can disclose the harms resulting from WOP's (mis)use by powerful actors to justify oppressive practices as a prerequisite to challenge such practices and mitigate the harms they cause. Thus, critical consideration of research in WOP may meaningfully contribute to solving pressing global issues, such as PE, and strengthen the impact of research in WOP. Considering (open and concealed) power relations and hegemonies can help to engage people for the greater good and prevent abuse of research and power (McDonald & O'Callaghan, 2008). WOP researchers should recognize that we are not free from unquestioned beliefs and ideologies and that acknowledging these (by means of critical reflexivity) is crucial for high-quality research. While engaging in reflexivity on our own, we became increasingly aware not so much of the fact that (which is arguably obvious) but *how* the salience of different aspects of PE varies with political-economic and sociocultural contexts and different personal backgrounds. By repeatedly adopting different perspectives and comparing them to our own standpoint, we gained new insights into different employment and life situations (including our own) and how they shape experiences of PE. For example, from our own experience with PE in academia, the aspect of job insecurity with difficult life and career planning was most significant for us, although for many other precariously employed workers, insufficient wage levels and worries about how to get by financially (especially when there is no social safety net) were decisive for PE. These perspectives now act as an enriched background for our own research, helping us to study PE in a more comprehensive manner having removed some blind spots from our mental maps.

However, it is also important to discuss the limitations of critical reflection and reflexivity. Personal (questioning oneself), project-based (time constraints), and systemic (lacking valuation) challenges (Probst, 2015) limit its potential impact. Regarding the personal component, critical reflection and reflexivity must bear uncertainty to take responsibility and authority for personal and professional values, motivations, self-discipline, and actions, as well as the willingness to contest deeply held ways of thinking and being (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018). Consequently, critical reflection and critical reflexivity asks a lot of researchers and might be seen as too demanding for an effective approach to critical WOP. Time-consuming reflection processes also clash with the requirements of the neoliberal university (increasing quantitative demands, time pressures) and might prevent researcher engagement. A lack of valuation (by colleagues, administrators, funders, journals, etc.), representation (in curricula for students), and engagement (in research groups) are further barriers to effective reflexive research and action. The

absence of examples of best practice, training, and guidelines also makes critical reflexivity prone to charges of politically impotent "navel-gazing" that should be pre-empted and averted (Swan, 2008). In a similar vein, critical reflection and critical reflexivity should not fall into the trap of confessionalism, degenerating the practice into mere confession that may even serve to shield against a subjective stance being questioned (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018). To avoid becoming overly personal and promoting narcissistic, psychologistic, and de-politicizing qualities, the mutual conditionality of the subjective standpoint and the historical, social, and political dimensions should not be lost (Swan, 2008). The incorporation of critical reflection and critical reflexivity in curricula, initiation of reflection groups (in and outside university), and journals that explicitly promote and demand reflection/reflexivity (e.g., author positioning) are important means to address limitations and contribute to a system that values these processes. Mindfulness, contemplation, psychotherapy, creative writing, etc. can further assist with this (Probst, 2015).

Careful engagement in processes of critical reflection and critical reflexivity can be a valuable practice that can promote further development of a critical WOP. In line with McDonald and Bubna-Litic (2012), we maintain that "research, theories, and practice are only as good as the philosophies and theories that underpin them" (p. 859) and it is "[...] the context including the researchers [sic] own beliefs and values, the beliefs and values of the funding institution, and those implicit in the economic and political ideologies that are dominant at a given time" (p. 854). As a starting point for critical reflection and critical reflexivity, we recommend the checklist by Sanderson et al. (2019).

Cooperation and collaboration with scientists from diverse fields and different economic and cultural contexts can improve insights and help us address the challenge of contributing to more inclusive WOP research. A critical approach to WOP can learn from and draw upon critical approaches of related social sciences, especially critical management studies and critical social psychology, as these disciplines examine related research topics and issues and have a long tradition in critical thinking and critical research. Critical discussions on theories, concepts, research projects, and methods with scientists from non-Western contexts will also broaden our perspective (and shed light on blind spots) and hence will benefit WOP and workers around the world. Institutions such as WOP journals and associations are also called to put greater efforts into nurturing, supporting, and publishing the research of work and organizational psychologists with non-mainstream perspectives (e.g., Global South, feminist, non-Western, and non-affluent societies). Currently, many critical work and organizational psychologists publish their research in sociological or other related scientific journals or non-impact WOP journals because high-impact WOP journals mainly publish mainstream research. As a result, different and/or critical perspectives in WOP reach only a limited audience among WOP researchers and practitioners, helping perpetuate the status quo. Special issues like this one serve as an important door opener to bring critical perspectives into well-known WOP journals. Our contribution outlines how processes of critical reflection and critical reflexivity are important tools for critical WOP, and we hope this stimulates future research in WOP for a wide range of research interests, theories, concepts, and methods. Notably, critical reflexivity and critical reflection, as outlined above, are meant to be viewed as a continuous process that constantly builds awareness of contexts and questions a normative system, not only of our own values and beliefs as researchers in WOP but our profession as a whole. Finally, engaging in this continuous process of critical reflexivity and critical reflection can assist WOP researchers to overcome (unconscious) neoliberal ideology within WOP (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Dóci & Bal, 2018), to build collective normative values on traditional humanistic aspects of psychology

(Lefkowitz, 2016), and to contribute to the humanization of work for all workers. In doing so, we hope this article contributes to the broader agenda of critical WOP and aligns with existing recommendations from other scholars, providing optimism for the expansion of WOP research into new areas in the future.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical approval is not necessary.

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