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From Voluntariness to Coercion: The Heterogeneity of Work Under Nonstandard Employment

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Abstract: Although flexible employment is a prominent subject of sociological research, specific arrangements still require further investigation. This article addresses this gap by analyzing three nonstandard forms of employment among data analysts and care workers: 'bogus' self-employment, mandate contracts, and undeclared work. It addresses the main research question of whether such employment invariably worsens working conditions, or whether it can also constitute a desired form of employment. The study shows that the lack of formal regulation – which is a consequence of the lack of standard employment – does not automatically lead to precarization, and that workers' motivations range from voluntariness to coercion, illustrating the heterogeneity of this broad category. Depending on the specific form of employment, labor market sector, age, and individual resources, such employment can function either as a strategic choice enabling certain benefits or as a source of precarization.

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Introduction

Although the rise of nonstandard employment is a trend observed across the European Union, it is particularly pronounced in Poland, where the number of temporary contracts has sharply increased in the 21st century, reaching one of the highest levels in the EU (Eurostat, 2024). Nonstandard forms of employment are regarded as key drivers of the flexibilization of work and have been widely analyzed, particularly in relation to the instability and precarization of the labor market. However, the specific forms of employment and their distinctive characteristics have not yet been examined sufficiently in research on ongoing changes in employment in Poland. This article seeks to address this gap from the neo-institutional perspective through a comparative analysis of three selected forms of employment.

This analysis begins with an acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of the category of nonstandard employment (Marler, Woodard Barringer, Milkovich, 2002; Kiersztyn, 2021) and seeks to move beyond approaches that equate nonstandard employment solely with adverse outcomes. To this end, it addresses the research question of whether nonstandard employment invariably worsens working conditions, or whether it can also constitute a desired form of employment. Accordingly, the main aim of the study is to analyze the circumstances under which nonstandard forms of employment are chosen voluntarily and translate into individual benefits, and when they result from necessity or coercion, leading to experiences of instability. To this effect, a comparative analysis is conducted between data analysis, which is a privileged labor market sector, and elderly care, which is a predominantly precarious sector, both with significant representation of workers with nonstandard forms of employment. The paper focuses on arrangements most prevalent in the studied occupations: mandate contracts, solo self-employment, and undeclared work.

The article is structured as follows. The first part examines the tension between the precarious nature of nonstandard employment and workers' subjective approaches, which do not necessarily condemn such arrangements. The second part outlines the methodology and research process, presenting the interpretative paradigm alongside the neo-institutional approach and describing the interviewees. The third part presents the findings, analyzing different forms of employment from the workers' perspective. The discussion highlights the heterogeneity of experiences and proposes an institutional reading of individual strategies. The article concludes by addressing limitations and suggesting directions for future research.

Nonstandard forms of employment in the neo-institutional approach

Forms of employment function as social institutions providing rules in everyday life, as they regulate the course of life, organize the work process, define the model of work, determine access to social security, and – by linking the individual to the state's welfare institutions – influence life beyond work (Giermanowska, 2013). In recent decades, we have witnessed a continuous decline in the number of people working under a standard employment relationship (SER), which is the arrangement that

provides the highest institutional protection (Rubery et al., 2018), alongside an ongoing process of the flexibilization of employment (St-Denis, Hollister, 2024). It results in the spread of nonstandard forms of employment, defined as different from the open-ended employment contract (Eurofound, n.d.).

Although this definition of nonstandard employment is grounded in regulations – which remain highly context-dependent, with particular arrangements shaped by each country's institutional context – there is a common consensus that nonstandard forms of employment worsen working conditions and are connected with the precarization of work in the aspect of security and work quality (see Kalleberg, Reskin, Hudson, 2000; Vosko, 2011; Standing, 2014). The lack of strict regulations governing nonstandard employment in relation to the organization of work leads to flexible working hours, which, when controlled by employers, negatively affect life beyond work (Wood, 2018). Atypical employment among young workers is connected to the "trap of instability", which is a situation in which entering the labor market with nonstandard employment negatively influences subsequent jobs (Xu et al., 2024) and leads to persistent precarity instead of stabilization (Booth, Francesconi, Frank, 2002). Nonstandard employment results in a deterioration of mental health (Irvine, Rose, 2024) and is connected to postponing childbearing (Laß, 2020). It is becoming particularly prevalent in the gig economy, where despite its heterogeneity (Wood, Martindale, Burchell, 2025), it is commonly associated with precarity (see Schor et al., 2020).

The flexibilization of employment is resulting in nonlinear careers (St-Denis, Hollister, 2024) which have become an institutionalized norm (Mrozowicki, 2016). It is linked to workers' changing understanding of stability as well as the tension between the need for security and employment models promoting flexibility. Although stable Fordist employment still serves as a vague reference point (Potter, 2020), among young workers stability depends more on negotiations between available resources and types of contracts rather than on permanent employment, which no longer guarantees protection (Winogrodzka, 2023). Surprisingly, nonstandard employment is not necessarily associated with subjective insecurity (Kiersztyn, 2017a), and precarious work has become the norm, perceived as a default situation or an individual problem (Mrozowicki, Trappmann, 2021). Actions undertaken against instability resulting from nonstandard employment are rarely addressed by unions and collective actions – which are present mostly in the platform economy (see Tassinari, Maccarrone, 2020) – and are usually dealt with individually. These individual actions vary from coping strategies among the working poor (Zielińska, 2023) to examples of the tactics of rule-bending and informal actions oriented toward profit among delivery couriers (Polkowska, Mika, 2023). Despite the limited effectiveness of coping mechanisms, they should be understood as manifestations of the so-called 'agency of the weak', i.e., everyday negotiations of freedom undertaken by underprivileged workers (Mrozowicki, 2011).

On the other hand, nonstandard employment is not only experienced as an adverse condition but can also be regarded positively. This is the case with 'boundaryless' workers, who, as "individuals seeking greater autonomy and flexibility, are using their experiences across multiple employers to increase their marketability and reduce their dependence on a single employer" (Marler, Woodard Barringer, Milkovich, 2002: 450). Such workers are specialized contractors who gain financial and organizational

benefits from short gigs (Barley, Kunda, 2006). However, a positive approach to nonstandard employment is reported not only among highly skilled individuals, but is also present among platform workers where instability is connected to freedom and autonomy (Purcell, Brook, 2022). This shift in approaches might be connected to a changing understanding of stability, reinforced by the neoliberal discourse of individualism and flexibility (Sofritti et al., 2020) as well as the desire for freedom and autonomy (Boltanski, Chiapello, 2007). Another reason for the positive evaluation of objectively precarious working conditions might be its contextuality, meaning its relation to employment perceived as "normal" (Dörre, 2014). This could be also linked to the young age of workers entering the labor market, who may not perceive nonstandard employment as problematic because of their biographical stage (Kiersztyn, 2021). Finally, individual and family resources that allow for the mitigation of adverse consequences of nonstandard forms of employment might play an important role in the absence of negative experiences (Kiersztyn, 2020).

In Poland, the broad category of nonstandard employment includes numerous arrangements: temporary employment (Pol. *umowa o pracę na czas określony*), self-employment (Pol. *jednoosobowa działalność gospodarcza bez zatrudniania pracowników*), civil law contracts such as the mandate contract and the contract for a specific task (Pol. *umowa zlecenia* and *umowa o dzieło*, respectively), as well as undeclared work (Pol. *praca nierejestrowana*), all of which vary considerably in terms of the level of protection provided (Bąk-Grabowska et al., 2020). Although in Poland a SER remains the most common form of employment and the primary means of accessing social insurance, accounting for around 71% of the working population in 2024 (ZUS, n.d.), other forms have become increasingly prevalent, with temporary employment and self-employment now representing approximately one-quarter of the labor market – equivalent to 3.7 million people in 2022 (GUS, 2023; Eurostat, 2024). This rise in nonstandard forms of employment is the aftermath of the flexibilization of employment in the early 2000s, which was reinforced by changes in the labor market and Labor Code following the 2008 crisis (Karolak, 2020). Nonstandard forms of employment have not only persisted to the present day but also expanded because of (1) the legal context, in which there is no clear boundary between contracts governed by the Labor Code and those based on the Civil Code and Entrepreneurial Law; (2) the economic context, in which civil law contracts allow for higher net earnings for workers; and (3) the political context, in which, following the 2008 crisis, austerity policies led to an increase in outsourcing within the public sector (Muszyński, 2019). The aggregate category of temporary employment in Poland is characterized by the worst working conditions and security (Kiersztyn, 2017b). Mandated contracts – with growth connected to the so-called second wave of precarization (Karolak, 2020) – are linked to barriers in achieving financial independence and housing autonomy, as well as contribute to the postponement of decisions about starting a family (Poławski, 2012). Self-employment is an example of a growing type of employment becoming increasingly common in the platform economy (Polkowska, 2024) and, among others, in the IT sector in Poland (Pilch, 2023). Undeclared work, despite a radical drop in numbers, still prevails on the labor market as the arrangement used by the unemployed and the working poor (Szewczyk-Jarocka, Nowacka, Jarocka, 2023).

Methods and data

The analysis addresses the issue of nonstandard forms of employment from the workers' perspective. As new institutionalism has not developed a specific approach to studying the micro-level (Greenwood et al., 2017), the study of workers' experiences and perspectives is conducted within the qualitative paradigm of interpretative research (Bevir, Blakely, 2019), and focuses on three dimensions: access to regulations and protection, the organization and quality of work, and the reasoning behind the choice of nonstandard employment.

Table 1. The list of the interviewees

No.	Pseudonym	Group	Gender	Age	Employment arrangement at the time of the interview	Education
Data analysts						
1	Maciej	Data analyst in a private company	M	22	Mandate contract	Higher (bachelor's)
2	Andrzej	Data analyst in a private company	M	24	Mandate contract	Higher (bachelor's)
3	Aleksander	Data analyst in a private company	M	25	Mandate contract	Higher (master's)
4	Czesław	Data analyst in a private company	M	25	'Bogus' self-employment	Higher (master's)
5	Robert	Data analyst in a private company	M	30	'Bogus' self-employment	Higher (master's)
6	Grzegorz	Data analyst in a private company	M	30	'Bogus' self-employment	Higher (master's)
Elderly care workers						
7	Kaja	Care in a private care facility	W	32	Mandate contract, undeclared work	Secondary
8	Marzena	Informal private care, private care facility	W	39	Mandate contract, undeclared work	Vocational
9	Alicja	Informal private care	W	45	Undeclared work	Secondary
10	Beata	Informal private care	W	47	Undeclared work	Secondary
11	Dominika	Informal private care	W	49	Mandate contract	Secondary
12	Helena	Informal private care	W	51	Undeclared work	Secondary
13	Karolina	Informal private care	W	52	Undeclared work	Higher (master's)
14	Katarzyna	Informal private care	W	54	Undeclared work	Higher (master's)

Source: own work.

The research draws on a doctoral research project concerning flexible working arrangements. In the project, the interviews were conducted with workers in nonstandard forms of employment and, for context, with those on standard employment contracts. Expert interviews with union representatives

were carried out, too. The article draws on a subsample of 14 interviews, selected with a focus on specific types of employment. The interviews constitute a qualitative, purposive, non-probabilistic sample based on the snowball method (Babbie, 2002), derived from private contact networks and thematic groups on social networking sites. The sample comprises six men employed in data analysis, aged between 22 and 35, all with higher education and working under 'bogus' self-employment or mandate contracts; as well as eight women aged 32 to 54 engaged in elderly care, mostly in private households, under mandate contracts or undeclared work, the majority of whom hold secondary or vocational education (see Table 1).

The sample is highly differentiated by gender, age, the level of education, and the type of working arrangement. On the one hand, it provides data that enables the comparative analysis of differences in approaches to nonstandard forms of employment. This way, information was obtained on two markedly distinct arrangements – self-employment and undeclared work – as well as on the experiences of work under mandate contracts in two sectors. On the other hand, such diversity can significantly shape the experience of employment forms, especially the approach to security and the availability of resources allowing for coping with insecurity. Hence, the findings should be interpreted with caution.

Data was collected through biographical narrative interviews, supplemented with questions on predefined themes: the meaning and value of work; the ideal model of work; experiences with forms of employment and the Labor Code; security and insecurity; perceptions of success; political views; and family and housing circumstances. The biography was thus treated as a means rather than a subject of research (Helling, 1990). The interviews lasted from under one hour to four hours. The obtained narratives were analyzed in two simultaneous stages – substantive and theoretical (Hernandez, 2009). Substantive coding was applied to transcribed interviews, field notes, and biographical portraits, enabling the development of themes in subsequent interviews and the identification of core category of nonstandard forms of employment. This was followed by theoretical coding focused on the neo-institutional analysis of employment forms and their regulatory aspects. The analysis was supported by the MaxQDA software, facilitating the coding process (Saldaña, 2009).

The study of nonstandard working arrangements carried the risk of revealing sensitive information, including illegal or informal practices. The participants also often shared personal aspects of their lives, such as family matters and individual struggles. In the elderly care sector, this sensitivity was heightened by the nature of the work – frequently involving palliative care and illness – which could evoke traumatic experiences or emotional distress. To address these concerns, the research was conducted in line with the Ethical Code of Sociology (PTS, 2012). All the participants took part in the research voluntarily and were fully informed of the study's purpose. The researcher carefully attended to psychological comfort, approached sensitive topics with caution, and obtained formal consent for recording, transcription, and analysis. The interviews were subsequently anonymized and securely stored offline.

Findings: Workers' experiences of nonstandard forms of employment

Circumventing formal rules from a position of security – 'bogus' self-employment as a route to personal profit

The use of solo self-employment among data analysts is an example of a voluntary choice of a nonstandard form of employment, which does not translate into the subjective experience of insecurity. Self-employment in Poland is an arrangement which provides a degree of security – it entitles individuals to health and pension insurance; however, it neither regulates working conditions nor provides employment protection[1]. Although its intended purpose is to enable individuals to run their own business, in the case of the interviewees (data analysts) it is used contrary to its regulatory intent, functioning as a tool to optimize individual profit. It is referred to as 'bogus' self-employment, which involves meeting the formal criteria for a standard employment contract – such as employer-controlled work, place and hours – while invoicing for payment (Skrzek-Lubasińska, Szaban, 2019), which is a deliberate practice, as Czesław – who is a 25-year-old data analyst with 'bogus' self-employment – states:

> So, if this entrepreneur test[2] currently being planned were introduced, I'd probably fail every time, I've been running my business like that all along.

The benefits of self-employment for data analysts start with high remuneration; through this arrangement, they can optimize their tax burden and receive higher net income (see Lasocki, 2021). Moreover, as they work in 'bogus' self-employment – so *de facto* they perform standard employment – they establish informal agreements with employers which provide them with access to paid leave, leave on request, notice periods, private healthcare, and opportunities for professional development, all of which equate their employment with a SER. An additional benefit, strongly emphasized by the interviewees, is the opportunity for flexible work organization – including remote work and nonstandard working hours – which they report is generally unavailable under a standard employment contract. That is confirmed by Robert, a 30-year-old data analyst with 'bogus' self-employment:

> For example, I recently had my third dose of the [COVID-19 – S.B.] vaccine and it completely knocked me out. I wrote that I simply wasn't able to come in, and my boss said, no problem, and so on. I just didn't show up, that's all.

Altogether, these factors render self-employment not inherently insecure but a beneficial arrangement. Their relation to self-employment is highly specific, as they can mitigate potential insecurity through informal agreements and individually available resources such as cultural and economic capital. This

1 For the relevant legal regulations, see the Civil Code (Dz.U. 1964 No. 16, item 93) and the Entrepreneurs' Law (Dz.U. 2018, item 646).

2 Control by the State Labor Inspectorate verifying whether given self-employment is not 'bogus.'

sector, at the time of the research[3], relied on highly specialized higher education, preferably from technical or business schools, and on skills requiring career planning and self-development, similar to specialists benefiting from temporary contracts (Barley, Kunda, 2006). They navigated their careers with expected breaks in employment, supported by savings from highly remunerated work and labor market confidence; they were assured of finding subsequent employment. Potential pension insecurity was offset by private investments and strategic planning. This is illustrated by Grzegorz, a 30-year-old data analyst with 'bogus' self-employment:

> So, to sum up, I feel that at this stage [of career – S.B.] it's the most profitable and also the most flexible type of employment for me. […] Of course, that comes with greater responsibility, because I'm the one who needs to consider whether I can generate certain expenses or which form of taxation is the most advantageous for me, and so on. […] On my own, I try to save and invest with retirement in mind.

Their strategies were embedded in beliefs promoting individual rationality as the key to success and a rejection of state interventions, reinforcing their choice of nonstandard employment (Sofritti et al., 2020). Their relatively young age and the lack of dependents enabled them to take risks for potential gains rather than seek conventional stability, with the latter being more applicable to data analysts on mandate contracts, described in the next section.

Heterogeneous experiences of mandate contracts – between strategic choice and exploitation

Mandate contracts, as nonstandard forms of employment present in the two labor-market sectors under study, are experienced very differently depending on the type of occupation, ranging from beneficial positions to precarious ones, thereby highlighting their heterogeneity. Mandate contracts are civil-law-based forms of employment designed for the completion of specific tasks and provide partial access to social security – healthcare and pension entitlements – while lacking a regulation of employment security, paid leave, and working conditions[4]. They are commonly used in Poland as the illegal substitute of a SER (Muszyński, 2016), which was the case in both sectors, where the conditions for standard employment contracts were formally fulfilled.

Among data analysts, this type of contract was chosen voluntarily due to financial benefits and the absence of insecurity. They were eligible for tax relief[5], which translated into significantly higher net income. Also, as they had the student status and were under 26 years old, they had access to healthcare and were exempt from paying any social security contributions. Moreover, they did not perceive

3 The relative security associated with employment in the IT sector has diminished as a consequence of the rapid diffusion of AI tools, which have intensified competition and heightened job insecurity.

4 Specific regulations are set out in the Labor Code (Dz.U. 1974 No. 24, item 141) and the Civil Code (Dz.U. 1964 No. 16, item 93).

5 They benefited from the PIT for Young People, which is an exemption from income tax for individuals under 26 earning income from employment, internships, or apprenticeships – intended to enhance employment opportunities for young workers.

their situation as insecure, given their life stage; they were entering the labor market and did not have family obligations. This allowed them to explore opportunities while retaining the prospect of stabilization after completing their studies and obtaining secure standard employment, which is a career trajectory particularly accessible in data analysis. It is the perspective of Aleksander, a 25-year-old data analyst with mandate contract:

> In the future, once I've finished my studies, it would probably be better to have a standard employment contract, so that work is more regulated and I'm not in a situation where, for example, I might have to work 15 hours a day. […] For now, however, I'm still on a mandate contract, purely for economic reasons.

Regarding working conditions, this group of the interviewees had access to all benefits associated with a SER, such as paid and sick leave, time regulations, and workplace benefits through informal agreements with employers. The lack of the experience of insecurity was emphasized by Andrzej, a 24-year-old data analyst working with mandate contract:

> Of course, there's the issue of pension contributions, job security, and permanent contracts. However, that doesn't really concern me, because I'm in a position where I don't have to fear that my contract will be terminated. The contract is naturally renewed, and I would really be very surprised if it were ever ended.

It is clearly an example of a nonstandard form of employment serving as a stepping stone to stable employment, facilitated by the labor market sector and the resources of workers committed to self-development and the acquisition of specialized skills, who might have also been socialized to a deregulated labor market where nonstandard employment is a normalized type of arrangement (see Sadowski, Mach, 2021). The situation of young data analysts is evidently privileged when compared with care workers employed under the same type of contract. In the latter case, mandate contracts represent clear examples of exploitation, where workers are coerced into accepting such contracts and, due to limited bargaining power, have little choice but to comply. They did not derive tax benefits from this arrangement, as they are over 26 years old, as well as they could not secure access to social security through academic institutions or parents. This form of employment is condemned by Kaja, a 32-year-old care worker working with mandate contract:

> And what else can be said about mandate or specific-task contracts[6]? They're basically 'junk contracts,' because in a few years these contracts can just be thrown away [because they do not contribute to long-term stability – S.B.].

6 Specific-task contract (Pol. *umowa o dzieło*) is another type of nonstandard employment, which provides no job security, no social security, and no pension benefits.

In the experience of this group of the interviewed care workers, mandate contracts created a number of insecurities. The first one was low remuneration, which, despite being formally constrained by the minimum wage, remained insufficient. They did not have access to paid leave, and the lack of regulation also extended to working hours, which often exceeded a full-time workload – a situation particularly problematic in care work, which is physically and mentally demanding. It is bluntly stated by Marzena, a 39-year-old care worker working with mandate contract:

> And above all, [I wish – S.B.] at least the salaries would be raised, because given our hourly costs, what we earn is really just a laughable amount. We really give our all, and we get almost nothing.

The interviewees reported the lack of employment security, citing cases of termination at short notice, as experienced by some of the participants. Compared with data analysts, they experienced only the formal provisions of the contract, i.e., without additional agreements with the employer, and the nonstandard form of employment was the main source of precarity. They coped with these drawbacks using individual strategies, mainly private pension funds, additional private health insurance, and strategic planning of employment. Both cases illustrate formal violations of the Labor Code, yet their consequences differ considerably. First, the experience of work is shaped by factors such as career stage, with mandate contracts among data analysts serving as a "stepping stone", whereas for care workers they constitute the "trap of instability" (see Kiersztyn, 2021). Moreover, at the level of working conditions, the data analysis sector provides informal agreements that mitigate the adverse effects of the lack of regulation, whereas among care workers all negative consequences fall directly on them. Consequently, mandate contracts, in the absence of additional resources, unequivocally result in the precarization of employment.

Undeclared work as a grim necessity – insecurity and bottom-up strategies

Undeclared work is a nonstandard working arrangement that provides no formal protection or regulation, and results in complete insecurity for workers[7]. It was observed only among care workers, where it was reported to be the most common form of employment for individual clients. The choice of this form is primarily driven by low wages – which, after taxation, would be insufficient for subsistence – and by the limited availability of alternatives. The social acceptance of undeclared work in the care sector and established client practices further facilitates its prevalence. It is accepted by Beata, a 47-year-old care worker in undeclared work:

> I'm not looking for work; it keeps finding me on its own, so it just goes on by itself. I haven't had time to think about changing anything. I've only been considering starting my own company. However, with these fees and taxes, I simply prefer to invest in my child.

7 Undeclared employment is defined in the Labor Code; however, it does not confer any legal protection on workers.

Care work operates in a 'grey zone,' and standard employment, although desired, is perceived as inaccessible. Experiences with formalized work (mandate contracts) do not provide a viable alternative, as described in the previous section. Therefore, despite its risks, undeclared work is perceived as a rational choice within the context of the labor market sector and the regulatory environment, although it is associated with multidimensional insecurity, as stated by Helena, a 51-year-old care worker in undeclared work:

> You know, I have life insurance. I need a moment to think… I mean, when these thoughts hit me, I get terrified. I wouldn't want to be a burden to my daughter. When I think that I might not have a pension, I'm really very scared. […] I live with the thought of whether, at 60 or 65, I will be forced to go work in Germany. Because that's mainly where women like me end up working. You know, I'm afraid, I really… I'm afraid of the future.

In response, workers develop grassroots strategies, forming an informal network of norms and rules. To cope with the lack of social security, they secure access to public healthcare either by registering as unemployed or through coverage under a partner's insurance. Some workers additionally purchase private health and accident insurance, which provides partial protection but does not eliminate uncertainty and the unpredictability of future planning. To manage employment instability and the absence of labor regulation, the interviewees' strategies include saving and flexible work planning. Caregivers perform work in live-in, shift-based, or visiting arrangements, often combining multiple modes and assignments, with multitasking resulting in variable working hours and duties, ranging from round-the-clock care to minor household tasks. They plan their employment in advance and maintain networks that may secure their next gig; however, they do not have full control over their work, as was the case for Karolina, a 52-year-old care worker in undeclared work:

> It can happen, like what happened to me last year: three of my patients died within a week, and practically overnight I was left on my own. I had two remaining, and with such costs of living it is not enough. I ended up losing all three patients at once, and that was it.

Grassroots strategies thus involve the combination of help from family, private insurance, and financial planning, enabling survival under the conditions of uncertainty – though not eliminating it entirely – and prompting some workers to consider changing employment sectors. Despite coercion, they exercise agency by organizing work procedures, financial safeguards, and access to insurance. Despite precarious conditions, remaining in undeclared work provides a degree of autonomy.

Conclusion and discussion

In addressing the question of voluntariness and coercion in the choice of nonstandard employment, as well as its implications for the experience of work, the analysis produces two main conclusions. First, experiences are highly heterogeneous, with substantial variation in practical access to protections that

is not solely determined by formal regulation. Second, nonstandard employment relies on bottom-up strategies to secure protection; without them, the existing safeguards remain inadequate. Experiences differ between workers in peripheral and central labor markets; although both groups preferred secure employment, only data analysts achieved a satisfactory degree of stability within nonstandard arrangements (see Table 2). The key differentiating factors include sector, age, and individual resources.

The contracts perceived positively are 'bogus' self-employment and mandate contracts, though only within the data analysis sector. Owing to the high degree of specialization, relatively high earnings, and the possibility of negotiating informal agreements with employers, working in data analysis allows for the effective circumvention of reliance on state regulation. In the case of 'bogus' self-employment, nonstandard arrangements function as a substitute for standard employment relationships (SERs), with high remuneration and work quality ensured through informal agreements (see Pilch, 2023). This stands in contrast to other sectors, particularly the platform economy, where self-employment operates as a coercive arrangement generating instability and precarization. Mandate contracts among young data analysts often serve as a stepping stone toward secure employment, providing opportunities to transition either into a SER or into 'bogus' self-employment, which they perceive as stable.

The interviewees' experience represents a variation of "boundaryless workers" (Marler, Woodard Barringer, Milkovich, 2002), as they operate within the internal labor market of data analysis as specialized workers deriving benefits from nonstandard employment (Barley, Kunda, 2006). What distinguishes them from the classical understanding of this category is their aspiration for stability rather than a pursuit of short-term gigs. They achieve this through 'bogus' self-employment, guided by a reflective approach to their biographies, planning their professional trajectories as "intentionally oriented" careers (Domecka, Mrozowicki, 2008), drawing on the resourcefulness of bricoleurs mobilizing multiple resources (Mrozowicki, 2011). Their approach to the instability and insecurity inherent in nonstandard employment can be interpreted as 'instability by choice', or, more precisely, as a perspective of 'work stability' aligned with employment flexibility (Winogrodzka, 2023). This approach is further reinforced by discourses promoting flexibility, which are strongly evident in the interviewees' narratives.

The negative consequences of deregulated work are evident in the experiences of care workers employed under mandate contracts and in undeclared work. Although care workers aspire to stability, nonstandard employment produces precarization, and they are resembling the "precarious blocked" type of worker (Mrozowicki, Trappmann, 2021), who seeks secure employment but lacks the resources to access a SER. For those on mandate contracts, the law – here, the Civil Code, effectively substituting for the Labor Code – fails to provide protective functions, supporting the observation that formal employment no longer guarantees protection (Winogrodzka, 2023). Given that mandate contracts are the only accessible form of employment in this sector, workers often turn to informal arrangements, which can be more profitable and offers more autonomy. Undeclared work cannot be described as secure, as it relies primarily on informal rules established by care workers themselves. Experiences of precarity are reinforced by the age of the interviewees, for whom care work is no longer merely an entry point into the labor market but often represents a long-term situation that can become a trap.

This results from their "patchwork careers" (Mrozowicki, 2011: 164), in which care work is typically one of several occupations in a worker's biography, often preceded by episodes in other jobs or undertaken as temporary or occasional work.

Table 2. Reasons and regulations – the heterogeneity of nonstandard forms of employment

	'Bogus' self-employment	Mandate contract		Undeclared work
Sector	**Data analysis**	**Data analysis**	**Care work**	**Care work**
Reasons	High remuneration, flexible yet stable employment.	High remuneration, access to benefits, early career stage.	Coercion and the lack of bargaining power.	Financial pressure, the social acceptance of undeclared work in the care sector.
Regulations	Social security by self-employment, benefits and regulations within informal arrangements, individual savings for pension.	Social security by university, benefits and regulations within informal arrangements.	Social security and limited regulations by Civil and Labor Codes, private strategies for pension.	Social protection acquired by unemployment or a family network. The lack of any other regulations.

Source: own work.

Therefore, while nonstandard employment is not automatically equated with instability, all such contracts provide lower levels of regulatory protection than SERs. Consequently, regardless of engagement being voluntary or coerced, workers must take active steps to secure at least a minimal or satisfactory degree of protection. Whether these actions take the form of strategic initiatives or coping strategies, individualization and informality prove essential for navigating nonstandard employment. The practices undertaken by workers in this context can be understood as a form of informal institutions in the sense of Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky (2004), where, despite operating outside official channels, such institutions still provide structuring rules.

Three types of worker-initiated practices can be distinguished among the interviewees. The first type is the institution of informal agreements between the worker and the employer, circumventing formal arrangements established by the Labor Code. The second one comprises individual strategies to secure access to social protection, while the third one consists of a set of informal rules and norms organizing the work process. For those who benefit from nonstandard employment and generate profit (in the case of this analysis – data analysts), these institutions can be considered 'competing', aiming to replace the formal institutions governing employment arrangements. Such institutions are created and enforced by both workers and employers, from which both parties derive benefit. Among those experiencing instability associated with nonstandard employment (in this analysis – care workers), informal institutions resemble 'substitutive' institutions, employed by actors seeking outcomes compatible with formal rules and procedures, thereby achieving through informal means what formal institutions were designed, but failed, to accomplish.

This analysis points to directions for further research on nonstandard employment, which should examine the role of informality and bottom-up strategies in the institutionalization of the process of deregulation. Such research should incorporate an analysis of public policies concerning nonstandard employment in order to integrate workers' experiences and strategies with the broader macro-level context.

Limitations

This article has several limitations. First, the selection of groups focused on cases at the extremes of the spectrum; including an intermediate group or analyzing a single group could have yielded different results. Second, access to the interviewees was challenging, and the qualitative analysis, based on a non-probability sample, inevitably shaped the material. More diverse family contexts and life situations would help to explore the role of social networks in security. Third, although the biographical data provided many leads, the analysis emphasized sector and age; future research could examine these narratives more deeply through class or gender. Finally, the rapidly changing institutional context – including shifts in the government and public policy since data collection – could affect the relevance of the findings, as illustrated by developments in the data analysis sector.

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Między dobrowolnością a przymusem: zróżnicowanie doświadczeń pracy w niestandardowym zatrudnieniu

Streszczenie: Choć elastyczne zatrudnienie stanowi przedmiot wielu badań socjologicznych, jego poszczególne formy wciąż wymagają pogłębionej analizy. Tę lukę uzupełnia artykuł, w którym przeprowadzona została analiza trzech niestandardowych form zatrudnienia wśród analityków danych i pracownic opieki: „pozornego" samozatrudnienia, umów-zleceń oraz pracy nierejestrowanej. Artykuł odpowiada na pytanie, czy niestandardowe zatrudnienie zawsze pogarsza warunki pracy, czy też może stanowić również pożądany typ umowy. Badanie pokazuje, że brak formalnych regulacji – będący konsekwencją braku standardowego zatrudnienia – nie prowadzi automatycznie do prekaryzacji, a motywacje pracowników i pracownic mieszczą się w spektrum od dobrowolności po przymus. W zależności od konkretnej formy zatrudnienia, sektora rynku pracy, wieku oraz indywidualnych zasobów niestandardowe zatrudnienie może funkcjonować zarówno jako strategiczny wybór umożliwiający uzyskanie korzyści, jak i prowadzić do prekaryzacji, co potwierdza wewnętrzne zróżnicowanie tej szerokiej kategorii.

Słowa kluczowe: niestandardowe zatrudnienie, elastyczne zatrudnienie, prekariat, samozatrudnienie, umowy-zlecenia, praca nierejestrowana, analiza danych, praca opiekuńcza