Positionings Towards the 'Work-Dogma' from the Margins: Making Sense of Vulnerabilities and Inequalities in the Interview Situation

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ABSTRACT

The norm of wage labor imposes itself on the unemployed as a material, legal and symbolic-discursive order. As 'deviants' from the norm, unemployed people are often confronted with pejorative judgments or social exclusion in everyday life. This paper asks how differently positioned unemployed people living in precarious circumstances position themselves in relation to the norm of employment and critique its accompanying social order. Based on the experiences with 25 interviewees, the paper argues that the social inequalities and power relations associated with the work-dogma permeate the research situation itself. This epistemic tension provides a methodological opportunity to place the interview situation and the mutual address between researcher and interviewee at the center of the analysis. Inspired by *Situational Analysis* (Clarke) and *Interpretative Subjectivation Analysis* (Bosančić), a heuristic is developed that focuses on inequalities and vulnerabilities in the research situation. The analysis of the interview dynamics reveals different modes of self-positioning with respect to the wage-labor norm, ranging from an embarrassed subordination under discursively transported subject positions to forms of critical appropriation and affective rejection. By identifying different self-positionings that challenge the norm of employment, the paper situates itself in ongoing debates within critical sociology, feminist epistemology and social philosophy about possibilities of criticism from the margins, arguing for a pluralistic and relational understanding of subversive practices and articulations of critique.

Keywords: interview situation, wage-labor norm, vulnerability, unemployment, qualitative methods

INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have witnessed a multitude of social crises and transformations, including pandemics and high unemployment rates alongside the rise of automation and digitalization, challenging social orders that link livelihoods predominantly to gainful employment (see, e.g., Weeks, 2011; Ferguson, 2015; Srnicek and Williams, 2016; Benanav, 2020). Despite these developments, debates about a decentralization of wage labor still tend to occur on the fringes of society while in most countries employment continues to be seen as the norm to secure one's own livelihood. Modern welfare states are still configured around the ideal of an 'active and employed citizen' (Gross et al., 2020: 2). In the German context, on which I will focus in the present article, the 'work-dogma' (Frayne 2015) is imposed as a material, legal and symbolic-discursive order.

On an institutional level, for example, insurance systems, laws and labor market policies privilege those who are employed (Englert et al., 2012; Lang and Gross, 2019), while job centers and employment agencies put pressure

on those classified as unemployed via an activation paradigm that supposedly increases their willingness to work (Dingeldey, 2007; Dörre, 2014; Senghaas et al., 2019; Traue et al., 2019).

The wage-labor norm is also visible as a symbolic-discursive order that strikes a clear division between allegedly active, independent, moral and hardworking employees and the allegedly passive, dependent, immoral and lazy unemployed. In media and daily life, such discriminatory attributions are often reproduced as defamatory social caricatures like the 'social parasite', the 'poverty immigrant' or the 'welfare queen', all of whom are portrayed as abusers of the welfare state (Oschmiansky, 2003; Lehnert, 2009; Romano, 2018). Thus, unemployment often leads to stigma, exclusion and material deprivation, placing many of those affected in a particularly vulnerable and marginalized position (Gurr and Jungbauer-Gans, 2013: 339).

Nevertheless, positionings of people outside of wage labor are not homogeneous, but are often connected to institutionalized and discursive 'deservingness-criteria' that provide an answer to the question 'who should get what and why' (van Oorschot, 2000). This leads to non-working people being confronted with the norm of employment in different ways, based on assumptions about their health, gender, affiliation, neediness, etc.

Against this background, the question arises to what extent the unemployed affirm or challenge the wage-labor norm and its associated institutionalized orders. As 'deviants from the norm', it seems likely that they have a certain interest in articulating a critique of it. However, the very effectiveness of the work-dogma could also suggest that they seek an affirmative relationship with it in order to avoid further social exclusion.

When I began to search for answers to this question, based on 25 qualitative interviews from my PhD research with the unemployed, I realized that forms of resistance and compliance with the wage-labor norm appeared not only in interviewees' responses to my questions but also in their interactions with me. I assumed that this might have something to do with the fact that the research situation could also be understood as an encounter between a person who conforms to the labor norm (the researcher) and a person who deviates from it (the participant). From this perspective, the participants seemed to follow very different ways of dealing with their positions as 'deviant' from the norm of wage labor in the interview situation, including hiding, revealing or negotiating vulnerabilities, inequalities or power imbalances. The present paper demonstrates how the analysis of interview dynamics and the relationship between interviewer and research participant can provide insights into different ways of affirming, challenging or critiquing the wage-labor norm from the margins.

This approach is inspired by previous methodological contributions that have shown how the social interaction in research settings is often affected by social inequalities and the negotiation of hierarchies and power dynamics (see, e.g., Davies, 2007; Berger, 2015; Hamilton, 2020; Frers and Meier, 2022). Instead of asking how these inequalities impact the co-construction of knowledge as it is often discussed, I explore this epistemic tension by understanding the research situation itself as worthy of analysis. In doing so, my contribution follows Frers and Meier (2022: 656) who claim 'that a critical reflection of inequalities in research relations can also be a contribution to research on social inequalities in general'. Methodologically, the present paper develops its own heuristic, inspired by *Situational Analysis* (Clarke, 2005) and *Interpretative Subjectivation Analysis* (Bosančić, 2021), paying particular attention to practices of mutual forms of address between researcher and interviewee and exploring different ways of self-positioning in the research situation.

Previous studies in the German context have highlighted that the wage-labor norm is rarely questioned from the margins (Bescherer et al., 2009; Englert et al., 2012; Dörre, 2014). These studies provide valuable insights but focus primarily on the statements and narrations of unemployed people. My research aims to complement them by exploring how normative orientations can also become visible in actions, affects and ways of dealing with vulnerabilities in practice. By shedding light on the way in which research participants interpret and appropriate the research situation itself and how they address me, I demonstrate how different ways of self-positioning can also be understood as affirmation or critique of the wage-labor norm and how they correspond with verbalized critiques.

With this approach, this article also presents empirical material relevant to broader epistemological debates in the fields of critical sociology and standpoint theories about whether people 'on the margins' of society or occupying specific oppressed or subaltern positions are epistemically privileged or disadvantaged by their specific social standpoint and, therefore, more or less capable of criticism (see, e.g., Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2003; Hill Collins, 2009; Fricker, 2010; Celikates, 2019; Hilscher et al., 2020).

Historically, marginalized groups of poor and unemployed people were often seen in one of two ways. They were either viewed as possible *revolutionary subjects*, for example, by famous scholars such as Marcuse (1998), Fanon (1963) and various anarchist thinkers, or they were defamed as the so-called *lumpenproletariat* following accounts of scholars like Marx and Engels, who contrasted them with the working class and portrayed them mostly as amoral, passive and incapable of critical actions (Bescherer, 2013; Barrow, 2020). These attributions were also taken up in later research on the unemployed, for example, when they were portrayed as passive and lethargic in the famous study on Marienthal (Jahoda et al., 2021) or when thinkers like Bourdieu (1999) or Castel (2017) were skeptical about the critical potential of the unemployed in their work on the precariat. However, this prompts the question

of whether stereotypes portraying unemployed individuals as passive are inadvertently perpetuated in some sociological contributions and whether potentially 'obstinate' (Dörre, 2015: 10; Marquardsen and Scherschel, 2022) forms of expressing critique from the margins are being sufficiently acknowledged.

Focusing on the interview situation itself and analyzing it as a possible *site of critique* allows us to step away from generalizations of epistemic privileges or disadvantages. Instead, this approach provides the means to closely examine the various forms critique can take and to investigate how they intersect with different mechanisms of inequality in specific contexts.

The present paper has two primary objectives: first, to develop an analytical heuristic for understanding inequalities and power dynamics in interview settings; second, to examine different affirmative and subversive practices and forms of critique emerging from marginalized positions in relation to the wage-labor norm. The paper contains three further sections. In the next section, I outline the methodological framework underpinning the study. Then, I present an in-depth analysis of various cases that illustrate diverse self-positionings towards the work-dogma from the margins ranging, for example, from *embarrassed subordination* to *critical appropriation* or *reflexive questioning*. In the conclusion, I synthesize these findings and offer a theoretical reflection on their broader implications.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The following analysis is based on an interview study conducted between 2020 and 2022 with 25 unemployed people living in different precarious circumstances in Germany. Emphasis was placed on recruiting a heterogeneous sample of interviewees, including single parents, refugees and elderly people, to capture a wide range of experiences and perceptions. The in-depth interviews focused on the respective life situation of the interviewees and their experiences of being unemployed within their social environment, with authorities and in their everyday life. The interviewees received an expense allowance of 30 euros in cash.

Given the possible vulnerability of the interviewees that requires certain ethical consideration (see, e.g., Aldridge, 2014; Shaw et al., 2020), special measures were taken to avoid risks like (re)stigmatization, (re)victimization or 'poverty voyeurism' on the part of the researcher. This included allowing the interviewees to suggest an interview location, ensuring their comfort and agency in the research process. This also provided insights into how the interviewees themselves understood the research situation and what setting they felt was appropriate. Typical in-depth interview techniques were used (Helfferich, 2011), such as very open questions, with interviewees advised that they could answer with what was important to them and that there were no 'wrong' answers or time limits.

During the fieldwork, it became clear that this relatively free scope I granted to the interviewees was perceived very differently. I realized that they addressed me in different ways: some highlighted my role as successful academic, others emphasized that I am young and female, still others used the interview as an opportunity to meet a patient listener with whom to discuss their problems. It became obvious that 'in an actual, lived research situation, multiple various identity markers and their combinations should be considered' (Kaaristo, 2022: 746). These different interactions with interviewees highlighted that possible hierarchies between me and them were not rigid, but embedded in processes of negotiation and self-positioning. Following Meier and Frers (2022: 656), who suggest to look for 'productive uses of such power troubles for analyzing social inequalities', I decided that the interactions in the interview situations were themselves worthy of investigation and could provide important clues to my research question. Thus, the research interactions became the starting point for my analyses of self-positionings towards the wage-labor norm. I developed a heuristic inspired by the combination of two methodological approaches: Situational Analysis and Interpretative Subjectivation Analysis.

Mapping Relations of Social Inequality with Situational Analysis

The perspective of *Situational Analysis* (Clarke, 2005; Clarke et al., 2018, 2022), which is inspired by feminist epistemologies, prominently criticizes the idea of a disembodied relationship between interviewees and interviewer. It is particularly suitable here as it emphasizes that 'we are, through the very act of research itself, directly in the situation we are studying' (Clarke, 2005: 12) and thus calls for reflection from the outset on the research situation, its inherent inequalities and the role of the researcher within this situation. By drawing on Haraway's (1988) notion of situated knowledge, Clarke furthermore stresses the partiality of all perspectives and one's multiple positionings within the world.

One of Clarke's main strategies to analyze *situations* is to map 'the major human, nonhuman, discursive, and other elements in the research situation of inquiry and provoke analysis of relations among them' (Clarke, 2005: xxii). I used such a mapping for the following analysis of the interview situation, as it makes visible the location within social relations of inequality of interviewer and interviewee. This mapping, illustrating our diverse connections to discourses, institutions and social networks, highlighted the dominance of the work-dogma. The

interaction of my interviewees with authorities, friends or with prevailing discourses was predominantly influenced by their status as 'unemployed' and by their necessity to sustain themselves outside of wage labor. In contrast, my position as a university-based researcher placed me in a distinctly different context. In a second step, I focused on the very relationship between me and the interviewees to understand questions such as: What happened there? How did we address each other, given our multiple but different positionings? Which identity markers, such as gender, citizenship, age or class, were emphasized in the interaction? Which were concealed, ignored or passed over? Using this method, it became apparent how our interaction was influenced by various dimensions of inequalities and how these were replicated, to varying degrees, within the research setting. These references to inequalities also proved particularly insightful as they invariably entailed forms of self-positioning that underscored aspects such as commonalities, differences or hierarchies between us. To refine the analysis of *self-positionings*, I then incorporated Interpretative Subjectivation Analysis as a complementary method.

Analyzing Self-Positionings with Interpretative Subjectivation Analysis

Interpretative Subjectivation Analysis (ISA) (Bosančić, 2014, 2021) offers a methodological approach to research normative orders and modes of action, thoughts, and perceptions of people in an empirical 'double perspective' (Bosančić, 2021: 143). It is therefore suited to understanding the effects of, and responses to, the wage-labor norm in the interview situation.

Following basic concepts of American pragmatism, symbolic interactionism and the sociology of knowledge, ISA is based on a 'minimal anthropological understanding of the subject' (ibid: 144) that sees human beings as situated within symbolic and normative orders but not completely determined by them. ISA suggests addressing the question of power effects of these normative orders empirically and to investigate their internalization and the *creatively obstinate self-positionings* of subjects towards them. ISA calls these 'resignification processes' (ibid: 145) that take place when people are addressed by discursive orders and confronted with the corresponding subject positions.

Following the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse, ISA defines *subject positions* as

> "discursively constituted subject ideas, model subjects and identity templates that suggest to possible addressees how they have to shape their self in order to be 'successful' in certain contexts, for example, to receive recognition or to be perceived as 'normal'" (ibid: 147)[1]

In the context of the wage-labor norm, it becomes evident that prevalent societal perceptions often associate the subject position of 'unemployed' with attributes such as laziness, dependency or exploitation of the welfare system, underpinned by a notion of personal culpability for one's unemployment. Consequently, these subject positions often imply that the unemployed must either be 'activated' to contribute meaningfully to society or possess a socially acceptable justification for their inability to engage in the workforce such as older age, illness or having caring responsibilities for children or older relatives.

In the case of research about unemployment, the interview itself can be understood as a situation in which the interviewees are addressed with the subject position of 'the unemployed', evoking this 'resignification process'. Even if the researcher – hopefully – does not make any pejorative or stigmatizing comments, the very announcing of the topic of study as 'something about unemployment' activates these specific normative and symbolic orders.

The concept of self-positioning that Bosančić develops thus encourages the analysis of different *interpretations*, *appropriations* or *rejections* of these subject positions. He describes these as 'a tentative, precarious, dynamic, changeable and unfinishable process of coming to terms with normative demands and identifications' (ibid: 148). Merging this with Situational Analysis for my research entails understanding the relationship between researcher and participant as a situation where, in acknowledging or ignoring various inequalities, a corresponding *self-positioning* in relation to the norm of gainful employment is conducted. This perspective enables an exploration of forms of critique that transcend binary classifications like 'capable of critique' or 'incapable of critique', or adherence and non-adherence to the employment norm. In my analysis, I have concentrated on these nuances, examining interview excerpts, self-representations and behaviors to discern tendencies towards affirmation, appropriation or rejection of specific subject positions connected to unemployment. Since normative orders are also accompanied by certain 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1979), special attention was also paid to affects and emotions accompanying the self-positionings.

The following analysis therefore focuses on the normative order of wage labor within the research relationship, combining the relational approach of *Situational Analysis*, which emphasizes the situatedness and embodiment of both interviewer and interviewee, with *Interpretative Subjectivation Analysis*, which explores self-positioning towards subject positions outside wage labor.

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[1] Translations from German into English are by the author.

NAVIGATING THE WORK-DOGMA: INEQUALITIES, VULNERABILITIES, AND MODES OF CRITICISM

In this section I will present an in-depth exploration of various cases from my interview study, drawing upon field notes, interview excerpts and autoethnographic reflections. This examination aims to address key questions derived from my methodological framework, such as how interviewees shaped the interview setting, their engagement with me in highlighting or obscuring social inequalities, their self-positioning concerning non-wage labor, and the implications of these positions for possibilities of critique. I will also deal with the connection between performative responses to being 'unemployed' and verbalized forms of criticism during interviews.

In my analysis I identified a variety of distinct exemplary modes of self-positioning in relation to the wage-labor norm. I will present six of these modes in more detail and show how they become visible within the research situation. I will loosely juxtapose cases that share structural similarities, such as age, gender and challenges related to migration and asylum policies. This approach will implicitly reveal contrasts and similarities concerning social inequalities and welfare state classifications. Finally, I will summarize my primary findings in a table.

Embarrassed Subordination

In the following account of *embarrassed subordination* toward the norm of wage labor, I explore the case of Bärbel[2], an elderly woman. When I met Bärbel to conduct the interview, I was surprised that I could not remember her face. I knew I must have given her the research project flyer at a food bank, but apparently, she had not spoken to me or asked me any questions at the time, but had contacted me afterwards. In my field notes, I wrote about my arrival in her tiny apartment:

> "She greeted me hastily, quickly closed the door behind me, and barely looked me in the eye as she immediately directed me to a chair to sit down. I was surprised that she closed the windows despite the ongoing coronavirus pandemic".

I also noted a comment that Bärbel made about the television hanging on the wall before starting the interview, in which she said:

> "My brother gave me this huge thing. I'm sure one immediately thinks that fits: social welfare and then such a big TV".

Through her comment about the television, Bärbel directly identified herself as a welfare recipient and addressed the common societal suspicion that welfare recipients unjustly enjoy 'luxuries' like large televisions. She clearly felt the need to explain this to me, as if to anticipate and defend herself against any derogatory thoughts I might have had about her as I looked around her flat. Thus, following Bosančić (2021), she referred to the subject position of the 'welfare recipient' living a good life at the expense of others. Her way of 'coming to terms with normative demands' (ibid.: 148) in our relationship was to justify her ownership of the television by emphasizing that it was a gift. In doing so, she distanced herself from these prejudices but simultaneously reaffirmed the symbolic and discursive order connected with it through her justification.

During the interview, her way of dealing with the wage-labor norm became more obvious. She frequently addressed me as a successful academic, while framing her own life choices in contrast either as naïve missteps or as self-inflicted failures. My way of dealing with these references to hierarchies based on employment status was to respond to her in a particularly friendly and affirming way to make her feel more comfortable. Nevertheless, her narrations degenerated into an individualizing form of self-condemnation and self-loathing. This was particularly noteworthy because her story simultaneously revealed a variety of difficulties she faced from a very young age within patriarchal structures. She became a single mother as a teenager and later lived in several violent relationships, one with a more affluent man who exploited her labour for his business without providing her any payment or social insurance.

While Bärbel openly talked with me about her vulnerability connected to her poverty, her loneliness and the moral condemnations she faced, she also told me that she mostly tried to hide her life circumstances in other interactions: "I always keep an eye out to see if anyone sees me when I go to the food bank". So, every time she went to the food bank or the job center, she feared that her neighbors would see her and judge her for receiving benefits and help. Her shame meant that she had mastered the art of being invisible and moving inconspicuously. I retrospectively understood that this was the reason why I did not initially recognize her and why she closed the windows so fast: she did not want anyone to hear our conversation.

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[2] All names of interviewees have been anonymized.

This pattern aligns with Georg Simmel's (2013) observations on shame. Shame is triggered when a norm is subjectively perceived to have been violated. So shame (re)confirms power relations by degrading the person who, in feeling shame, acknowledges his or her subordination (Neckel, 1991). So in Bärbel's case, the deep-seated shame that drives her can be interpreted as an acceptance of the prevailing wage-labor norm. Although she clearly suffers from the norm of wage labor and the associated stigmatization and material restrictions of being unemployed, her shame prevents her from adopting a clearly critical perspective. Consequently, in her interview, I struggled to identify any explicitly articulated forms of critique of the work-dogma as she mainly blamed herself for her situation. At the same time, it is remarkable that Bärbel agreed to talk to me at all, as she usually tried to hide her life circumstances. This could be interpreted as an attempt at quiet criticism, since ultimately her stories were a detailed testimony of the scars and suffering that a life in poverty, exclusion and as a 'deviant' can mean for those affected. With a wink, one could say that Bärbel would perhaps like to leave it at the classical division of labor between 'ordinary agents' and 'critical sociologists' (Celikates, 2019): She provides me with the stories as an interviewee, but leaves the work of developing a possible critique from them to me.

Distanced Critique

In this section, based on the case of Heinz, I explore the mode of *distanced critique*. Upon initial observation, Heinz and Bärbel might appear to share similar circumstances: they are of comparable age, living alone in modest apartments and relying on supplementary pensions because of prolonged unemployment. However, a closer examination reveals stark contrasts in their responses to these conditions.

I approached Heinz because I knew he was politically involved in the unemployed movement and had experienced many years of poverty and unemployment. We arranged to meet for an interview in a green area not far from his neighborhood. As we sat down in the sun, Heinz pulled a book on the unemployment movement out of his backpack and asked me if I would like to borrow it. In my field notes, I wrote:

> "Somehow, we ended up discussing some political and sociological literature on unemployment even before the interview started".

By giving me reading suggestions at the very beginning of our meeting, Heinz let me know that our conversation would be more of a discussion between experts than between researcher and affected person; or perhaps even between 'established expert' and 'novice', given the 30-year age difference between us. In contrast to Bärbel, who made herself small and subordinate to me, Heinz confidently drew on his knowledge and experience as an unemployed person in his interaction with me.

Heinz's self-positioning in relation to the norm of wage labor became clear right at the beginning of the interview, when he described his life situation as follows:

> "After a long period of unemployment, paid for by the job center, I am now a social pensioner. This means that I have less pension than I'm entitled to and I get the rest from the social security office".

Instead of justifying or explaining his unemployment, he simply stated who pays for his livelihood. Viewed through the analytical lens of ISA, the subversive element of this narrative becomes visible. Heinz subtly engaged with the subject position of the unemployed, who are often viewed as illegitimately benefitting at the expense of others. Yet, instead of adopting this moral judgement, he presented living on welfare as completely legitimate and normal by not offering any explanation. Even the reference that he would be entitled to a higher social pension suggested a critique of the existing social system, while emphasizing his own 'deservingness' against the typical 'deservingness-criteria' in public discourses.

Throughout the interview with Heinz, it became apparent that his responses to my interview questions often transcended his individual experiences, favoring a broader, collective perspective on poverty and unemployment. He adeptly interwove specific challenges with a more generalized social analysis, radically challenged prevailing notions that equate work with happiness and questioned distributional logic predominately based on wage labor. So, Heinz's approach aligned more closely with what is often referred to as external or 'reflexive-distanced' critique (Bohmann et al., 2010: 57). Unlike a critique rooted in personal experience, his perspective was informed more by his understanding of societal mechanisms on a broader scale. Thus, I categorized his self-positioning as *distanced critique*: it radically questioned the norm of wage labor and was articulated from the position of external observer or expert rather than affected person.

However, Heinz also shared experiences that demonstrated how he practically applies his distanced critique in everyday life. For example, he told me about his time living in a community-oriented shared flat, where residents collectively sought alternative living arrangements beyond the constraints of employment, sharing resources and building solidarity. This aspect of his life, as well as his activism, reflects an 'engaged' critique, effectively bridging his theoretical perspectives with concrete, lived experiences. The divergence of Heinz and Bärbel in their self-

positionings illustrates the spectrum of responses to the norm of gainful employment in my sample. Heinz and Bärbel represent opposite ends of this spectrum, from a deeply internalized acceptance of societal norms to an externally focused critique. The subsequent case studies occupy the intermediate space in this continuum.

Reflexive Questioning

Martin's case exemplifies a dynamic interplay of *distanced critique* and *embarrassed subordination*, reflecting a persistent tension in navigating the norm of gainful employment. Martin reached out to me after seeing an advertisement I posted on an online forum for the unemployed, seeking interview participants. He attached his CV to his email, somewhat resembling a job application. Our meeting occurred on a rainy autumn day at the train station in his small town. I noted in my field journal:

> "We are roughly the same age, and it felt as though we could have been university classmates. The ease of our conversation was striking as we walked to his flat. His formal email had not prepared me for this."

At first, the relationship between Martin and me seemed defined by our similarities, facilitating an empathetic and dynamic conversation: He was just a few years older than me, shared an interest in political and philosophical matters, and appeared genuinely excited about my research, keen to discuss his experiences and viewpoints. However, once we sat in his neat apartment, with the recorder on, our stark differences became evident: While our paths initially paralleled - he with a humanities bachelor's degree and I with one in sociology - our journeys diverged thereafter. My path smoothly transitioned to a master's and then a doctorate, while Martin's career path stagnated. Despite good grades, he lacked the confidence for a master's in humanities and struggled to find suitable employment, ultimately relying on welfare for several years. Our meeting stemmed from our differences: my role as a university-funded researcher and his status as long-term unemployed.

During the interview, Martin seemed acutely aware of these disparities, linked to the wage-labor norm. At times, he, like Bärbel, resorted to self-justifications, particularly when discussing the challenges of job hunting. However, unlike her, he would occasionally pause and reflect on his narrative:

> "I've applied for every job there is - but you see, I'm starting to justify myself again. That's the thing - you always feel the need to say: Look, I tried. I tried."

Here, Martin directly addressed the subjectifying effect of the employment norm under the neoliberal activation paradigm, constantly attempting to demonstrate his activity and motivation. Through the analytical lens of ISA, it's almost palpable how Martin strove to shape his self in a way that would garner recognition or be seen as 'normal' (Bosančić, 2021: 147), although he was obviously critically reflecting on this mode.

Later in the interview, Martin became more explicit about how he perceived my position, stating:

> "I automatically place myself at a lower level. You're affiliated with a university, I'm unemployed - that's why I feel the need to justify myself to you, to explain why your taxes support me."

He thus perceived our interaction not merely as a research relationship (which his formal e-mail suggested) or a generational connection (as I had thought on our way from the train station) but primarily in terms of my role as a taxpayer and his as a welfare recipient. He pointed out that his responses were influenced by his deviation from the wage-labor norm and the vulnerability he felt in the interview. Here, he implicitly touched on the widely discussed methodological issue of how knowledge co-production in interviews is shaped by our unequal positions (see, e.g., Davies, 2007; Berger, 2015). By articulating this, he simultaneously critiqued and somewhat undermined this inequality effect.

When asked about his views, Martin – similar to Heinz – offered well-informed and critical perspectives on the work dogma, discussing concepts and authors related to degrowth or unconditional basic income and showing interest in livelihoods beyond employment. Drawing from his experiences, he also articulated a strong critique of the stigmatization of the unemployed in public discourse and by state authorities like job centers. He clearly understood and rejected hierarchies based on the work-dogma, yet in social interactions, he still subordinated himself to these structures. This became evident when he portrayed himself as the 'ideal' job seeker, relentlessly writing applications, and avoiding casual conversations to dodge the dreaded question: "What do you do for a living?"

In contrast to Heinz, who somehow succeeded in translating his *distanced critique* into everyday practices, Martin displayed a dual attitude towards the wage-labor norm: cognitively and reflexively, he presented a sophisticated 'external' critique, yet his actions and emotions seemed to affirm the norm. The interview became yet another arena where he was confronted with the dissonance between feeling less worthy as an unemployed person and his critique of a social order that hierarchizes based on employment status. However, the interview fulfilled a dual role: on one hand, it provoked self-justification in Martin, thus reinforcing the prevailing wage-labor norm; on the other

hand, it prompted a *reflexive questioning* of these very normative conditions, highlighting his internal conflict between subordination to and critique of the wage-labor norm.

Performing Non-Identification

In contrast to Martin's approach, my interaction with Chris, a male participant in his forties, presented a distinct set of challenges. We convened at the location he had suggested on a sunny day, and upon arrival, I immediately noticed the deserted nature of the place. At first, there were small things that made me feel uncomfortable: sometimes he struck a slightly flirtatious tone, then he addressed me primarily as a young woman or moved a little closer to me. Later, his narratives became more sexualized and aggressive, accompanied by inappropriate comments about my appearance. This shift in conversation transformed the interview setting into an uneasy and challenging environment. I found myself struggling to maintain the professional boundary as a researcher, feeling increasingly unsafe due to his remarks and behavior.

I prematurely terminated the interview due to growing concerns for my personal safety. This experience not only highlighted the complexities of power dynamics in interview settings but also emphasized the importance of ethical considerations and researcher safety in fieldwork. While my focus was often on the vulnerability of the interviewees, my encounter with Chris underscored the need to consider my own vulnerability (Bashir, 2020). This aligns with a growing critique by (feminist) researchers of the prevailing androcentric assumptions in qualitative and ethnographic methods and discussions about the problem of sexual harassment in fieldwork (see, e.g., Hanson and Richards, 2017; Kloß, 2017; Harries, 2022).

However, I was also interested in the question of how to analyze and understand this interview if I did not want to regard it as a 'failure' (Eckert and Cichecki, 2020). From the point of view of ISA, the focus is on the question of the extent to which Chris's behavior can be seen as a form of self-positioning in relation to the subject position of the gainfully employed. After all, it is precisely people like Chris, as middle-aged, able-bodied men, who are particularly confronted in public discourse with the demand to work for wages. Against this background, it was striking that Chris agreed to an interview on the subject of unemployment but then often did not take my questions seriously and instead told stories in which he presented himself as a masculine hero. His behavior undermined the intended dynamic of a research interview, which in this case was for me to be recognized as the researcher and for him to talk about his experiences as an unemployed person. Instead, by addressing me as a young woman, he shifted the focus to gender and age, dimensions in which he could assert a sense of superiority according to societal norms. This approach allowed him to sidestep the marginalized subject position of being unemployed, thereby concealing his own vulnerabilities by simultaneously highlighting mine. His behavior also entailed a denial of any suffering or vulnerability linked to the norm of gainful employment. He *performed* a *non-identification* with the norm, but did not *verbalize* any critique of it. Chris's case exemplifies how alternative identity markers can be used to navigate and resist marginalizing positions, albeit in a manner that eschews vulnerability and critique.

Critical Appropriation

Turning to the case of Said, I encountered a markedly different approach in the interview setting. Upon arriving at his apartment in a remote district, I was greeted by what felt like a 'welcoming committee' consisting of Said, his parents, teenage brother and uncle, all of whom had fled Iran. Their warm reception, complete with tea and snacks, set a tone of respect and hospitality. Said and his family clearly valued the opportunity to share his story, which they deemed important and worthy of wider dissemination. Said himself articulated this sentiment during our conversation:

> "You know, you and I talking now will help others someday. People will hear this, read this and see, aha, a person has experienced such terrible things and they will understand how hard it is".

This statement reflected his conscious decision to use the interview as a platform for public advocacy. In the interview, Said addressed me mainly as a witness or spokesperson to the injustices he had endured, presenting himself first and foremost as a victim. He envisioned the interview as a means to build a collective understanding, reaching out to both empathetic audiences and others in similar situations, emphasizing they are not alone. We therefore both had a clear agenda in participating in this interview situation: I wanted to conduct my research and he hoped to raise awareness about the problems faced by asylum seekers without a work permit.

Unemployment in Said's narrative was intricately tied to his residency status, which had been in limbo for years. His experiences as a refugee, living without a residence or work permit and relying on the benevolence of others, were central to his account. His story was thus deeply entrenched in external categorization processes: his eligibility to stay and work in Germany hinged on the classifications imposed by the welfare state and authorities. Therefore, he perceived his deviation from the norm of gainful employment not as a personal failing but as a consequence of these external classifications, which he deemed unjust. In his narrative, he frequently invoked the moral principle of equality, highlighting its violation in his treatment. His approach represented a form of *critical appropriation*, since

he adopted the classifications of the welfare systems, yet positioned himself as a victim of these circumstances. His critique, born from his experiences of suffering, focused on the intersection of wage-labor norms and asylum policies that systematically exclude and devalue specific refugees. Thus, his criticism was directed less against the wage-labor norm itself, but against the exclusions it produces through its link to asylum policy. In this respect, Said's case has some overlaps with Shania's.

Affective Rejection

I met Shania in a park on a sunny day. In my field notes, I wrote sentences like "She greeted me with a wide and open smile" or "As we are of the same age, I thought that passers-by will think we are friends as we sit down on a bench in the shade". During the interview, the more questions I asked, the more Shania opened up. I noted:

> "I got the feeling that she was waiting for my reactions, trying to find out if I am 'on her side'. So, I gave her the approval she seemed to be waiting for: in small gestures, I mirrored her emotions by laughing, nodding or gasping in indignation at the right moment".

Towards the end of the interview, she told me:

> "I think I never told someone all of this except from my family in Kenya. Sometimes you need someone to listen to you, maybe like in therapy. There are not many people who don't judge you if you talk to them. People already told me that I am lazy, but it's not true. I thank you for your listening. I feel better now, I feel happy."

The way Shania interacted with me in the interview showed that she needed time to build trust. I interpreted this in relation to our identity markers: I, positioned as a White person from a university doing my research 'on' her, positioned as a Black unemployed migrant. Once she seemed to feel safe, she displayed more of her emotions. She changed from angry to ironic to desperate when she talked about her experiences as a Black woman in Germany with a young child and looking for a job, and she told me about the harmful experiences of being classified as non-belonging, lazy and non-professional:

> "Tell me, how that makes sense? [laughs out loud] I always try to see everything in a positive light, but I just don't understand it. We all know that we have a problem with placements in daycare centers and kindergartens, don't we? How am I to blame? […] I want to work, but I don't have childcare for my child".

> (…)

> "Everyone says 'oh, you just want to sit at home, you foreigners, you come to this country to sit around and take tax from the Germans'. That's not true! Come to me and ask me - I've applied and I'll show you where I'm looking to study and find work, but I'm not getting anything. And then you tell me I just sit at home and get your taxes [laughs out loud]".

Based on her own experiences, Shania criticized a number of structural problems within the labor market that are intrinsic to being Black, being a mother and being a non-native speaker. Shania was unemployed because her Master's degree from Kenya is not recognized in Germany and she refused to earn a living as a cleaner, which was often suggested to her. Generally, therefore, she was oriented towards the norm of employment and was keen to find work, but refused to take just any job. Her critique, then, was not of the wage-labor norm per se, but of the unequal possibilities of meeting it at all, and how this translates into racist, sexist and classist stigmatization.

By reacting with anger, irony and despair to marginalizing classifications and dominant subject positions, Shania showed that she did not want to submit to them. The irony served as a way to distance herself from a social order that discriminates against her. With her anger, she furthermore rejected the submission to hierarchies and defamatory categories. It became obvious that Shania had a strong sense of injustice fueling her criticism of racist and patriarchal social structures.

Since Shania interpreted the interview as a therapy-like encounter that brought her relief, she also legitimated retrospectively that she put her feelings and her vulnerability at the center of our interaction. The fact that she saw me in the therapist-like role also meant that she did not feel ashamed or tried to justify herself to me, but revealed emotions and feelings that she would otherwise keep to herself while I gave her space, asked questions and assured her anonymity as a 'professional listener'.

However, it became clear that her *affective rejection* of negative classifications was mainly reserved for the interview situation and, even though she sometimes imagined herself standing up and speaking out against the injustices she faced, she told me that she mostly remained silent in other interactions. Ultimately, it seemed to me that Shania's

anger, which she combined with a precise critique of social structures, was nevertheless overshadowed by two other paralyzing feelings: powerlessness and hopelessness.

The Pluralism of the Social Criticism from the Margins

Table 1 summarizes the main findings by focusing on three key aspects that are closely connected to the different ways of self-positioning towards the norm of wage labor: (i) ways of addressing the researcher in the research interaction; (ii) ways of dealing with the subject position as being unemployed/as a welfare recipient; (iii) ways of dealing with vulnerability in the interview situation. These three aspects highlight the complexity and possible entanglements of the various self-positionings.

Table 1. Summary of the main findings

Self-positioning towards the wage-labor norm	Address researcher and respective self-positioning	Dealing with social position as 'deviant from the norm'	Dealing with own vulnerability within the interview	Source of criticism
Embarrassed subordination (Bärbel)	Successful - failed	Being ashamed of it	Defensive, oscillating between reliving and hiding it	Possibly pain and vulnerability
Distanced critique (Heinz)	Expert - expert	Fighting it on a societal level	Theorizing, objectifying	Rooted in social analysis
Reflexive questioning (Martin)	Taxpaying – receiving social benefits	Justifying it	Reflecting it, recognizing it during the interview	Rooted in social analysis and reflection on own experiences
Performing non-identification (Chris)	Young woman – masculine hero	Performing non-identification by dominant behavior referring mostly to identity markers such as age and gender	Concealing it, emphasizing the interviewer's vulnerability	Unclear
Critical appropriation of negative classifications (Said)	Witness/spokesman – victim	Suffering because of it	Narrating it, revealing it	Rooted in own suffering and ideal of equality
Affective rejection (Shania)	Therapist – client	Angry and disappointed rejection of discriminatory classifications	Revealing it within the interview	Rooted in anger and despair in combination with structural analysis

First, the table shows how differently the interviewees addressed me. Second, these addresses were usually very revealing in terms of how the interviewees dealt with their position as 'deviant' and corresponded with emphasizing, rejecting, or justifying their position. Third, the findings emphasize how the focus on one's own vulnerability within the interview can sometimes be the starting point for criticism (as in the case of Said) or at other times for affirmation of the existing order (as in the case of Bärbel). Fourth, the analysis also suggests that critique can embody both 'internal' and 'engaged' as well as 'external' and 'distant' roots. This is in line with theoretical debates about proximity and distance in forms of critique, which often distinguish between engaged-subversive or internal critique, rooted in personal experience and concrete practice, and reflexive-distant or external critique, based on (universalized) norms and abstract knowledge (Bohmann et al., 2010; Celikates, 2019). Although the position of the 'marginalized' is often more closely associated with engaged-subversive critique, my findings show that being affected by marginalization does not mean that the source of critique is primarily based on one's own experiences. In my case studies, it became clear that critique sometimes emerges from dealing with everyday hurdles and struggles, which sparks an interest in a broader understanding of contexts. On other occasions, an understanding of larger contexts transforms everyday experiences. Sometimes respondents found themselves in internal conflicts, struggling to reconcile different forms of affirmation and critique. In this case, it was not entirely satisfactory to reduce the complex (and sometimes contradictory) self-positionings of my interviewees to single terms. However, the distinction made here between embarrassed subordination, distanced critique, reflexive questioning, performing non-identification, critical appropriation of negative classifications, and affective rejection shows one thing above all: the diversity of forms and modes of expression of affirmation and critique of the wage labor norm.

This table should not be seen as an exhaustive list of forms of expression, but rather as an illustration of the myriad ways in which respondents navigate the classifications of the welfare state and the marginalizing subject positions associated with the wage-labor norm. What is not emphasized here, but is interesting for further considerations, is that the exploratory cases presented here also reveal variations in the attribution of causes of

suffering and thus in the objects of critique. For example, those who have been negatively affected by border regimes and frustrating experiences with asylum policies seem to be more likely to identify structural causes of unemployment, in contrast to German citizens without political affiliation, who tend to individualize these causes. While the critique of single mothers or refugees rather seems to focus more on problematic intersections of the wage labor norm with policies of belonging and care, it also addresses the wage labor norm less directly. Thus, these entanglements between the forms and content of critique require further research.

CONCLUSION

Adèle Clarke (2005: 14-15) sharply criticizes the idea of giving voice to the marginalized through research, arguing that all research reports bear the signature of the researcher. The present paper has not attempted to give voice to the marginalized, but it does claim to offer some insights into the plurality of these voices. Most of the unemployed feel compelled to position themselves against the 'work dogma' at almost every step they take, be it on the way to the food bank, where they either try to hide in shame or walk with their heads held high, or in the context of small talk about how they spent their day. The interview situation, in which they are asked directly about their unemployment, is one of many situations in which they are confronted with their 'deviation' from the norm of wage labor and must somehow position themselves. The findings of this article have shown how the analysis of the relationship between interviewer and research participant can therefore provide important insights into the question of self-positioning and critique in relation to the norm of wage labor.

As a first step, I presented a methodological approach that places inequalities, vulnerabilities, and self-positionings in the research situation at the center of analysis. Inspired by situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) and interpretive subjectivation analysis (Bosančić, 2014, 2021), my analysis showed how practices of mutual address can be a starting point for gaining insights into how interviewees challenge the norm of wage labor.

In theoretical and public discourse, it is often asked whether the poor and marginalized are, to paraphrase Reese (2008), 'too stupid to fight back'. This casual exaggeration is to some extent in line with previous studies on the question of the orientation of the unemployed towards the norm of gainful employment. They tend to conclude that the unemployed predominantly do not question the norm of gainful employment and thus, of course, do not question the normative and institutionalized order that contributes to their social exclusion.

My findings paint a different picture here: the main finding of this work is that there is a great variety of self-positionings in relation to the norm of wage labor, which cannot simply be reduced to a dichotomy of orientation and non-orientation towards it. Instead, critiques of the norm of wage labor emanating from marginalized perspectives are sometimes verbalized in clearly articulated perspectives, but sometimes expressed in more subtle ways, e.g., in affective reactions that contradict the prevailing rules of feeling, in vehement rejections of stigmatizing attributions, or in reflexive questioning of hierarchies based on employment status. The result is a complex situation in which respondents sometimes challenge the norm, sometimes subordinate themselves to it, or sometimes say one thing and do another. Thus, my findings show that critique from the margins is often multifaceted and contradictory, and can manifest itself in subtle, *creatively obstinate self-positionings* (Bosančić, 2021). Specifically, I have argued that different modes of self-positioning towards this norm can be distinguished, namely *embarrassed subordination*, *distanced criticism*, *reflexive questioning*, *performing non-identification*, *critical appropriation*, and *affective rejection*.

The interview situation itself can play different roles in this context. My research has shown that it can be the platform on which interviewees first develop their critique, a medium through which they seek to be heard more publicly, or a setting in which they feel inhibited from expressing their thoughts openly because of the norms and inequalities at play. However, it also becomes clear that many acts of critique expressed in the anonymized interview settings are hidden in various social interactions due to prevailing normative orders and the dangers of stigma and exclusion.

The findings support the standpoint theory idea that different modes of critique are intertwined with positionings in symbolic and institutionalized orders, although these orders do not dictate the potential for resistance and critique. Thus, it cannot be assumed that marginalized perspectives inherently confer epistemic privilege, but they do reveal the multiple perspectives and strategies of resistance to the work dogma. The unemployed, who are embedded differently in understandings and materializations of deservingness as refugees, mothers or activists, also have different insights into the functioning of the work dogma as an instrument of domination and marginalization. With Haraway's (1988) understanding of situated knowledges, one could emphasize the partiality of all perspectives here. Subsequent analysis following Haraway could attempt to condense and link these perspectives in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the wage labor norm.

While it is this partiality and heterogeneity of perspectives 'from below' that makes them so valuable for a complex understanding of the workings of the employment norm and the possibilities for challenging it in the face of current crises and developments, it is also this very heterogeneity, isolation and fragmentation that contributes

to the fact that these voices, and their forms of critique against the dogma of work often remain unheard and unseen.

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