

Flexible employment, flexible interviewing: Researching uncertain and ambiguous employment relations of Polish migrant workers

by Lisa Berntsen

email: L.E.Berntsen@rug.nl

Ph.D. Candidate at University of Jyväskylä and University of Groningen
and guest researcher at the Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Labour Studies

Today's labour markets are due to flexibilization of labour market regimes increasingly characterized by uncertain employment and ambiguous employer-employee relationships. Low-skilled workers have become more mobile within the European territory, especially since the Eastern enlargements, finding short-term employment oftentimes under precarious conditions (work that is considered uncertain, unpredictable and risky from a workers' point of view). There are many workers from Eastern Europe who continuously and casually move between worksites, sectors and countries throughout their careers. These moves are oftentimes facilitated by (transnational) temporary employment agencies.

To understand the phenomenological experience of workers working within these temporally and transnational uncertain employment relationships, the ethnographic tradition of "being there" (Geertz 1978) or traditional workplace ethnographies, do not suffice. Workers' lives stretch beyond the boundaries of particular workplaces or spaces and the mobility and dynamism of contemporary work migration patterns requires different methods than generally employed in organizational ethnographies.

This paper is based on my on-going research with Polish migrant workers in the Netherlands, working in the construction, distribution and meat sector. I show that primarily through interviews (and not participant observations) "thick" descriptive insights can be produced into the complexities of everyday working life of Polish migrant workers. I argue that the flexibilization and transnationalization of workplaces requires organizational ethnographies to adopt methods more along the lines of "polymorphous engagement" (Gusterson 1997: 116), by interacting with and interviewing informants in different settings and contextualizing data with input from different sources. I explore the working life stories of my informants via face-to-face and telephone/skype interviews as well as through email contact to trace their employment trajectories and changing intentions and ambitions over time. Since these workers work for limited durations at particular sites, it is only through the interviewing method that deeper understanding can be gained on how this flexible transnational labour regime works and what it means to be a worker within such uncertain and ambiguous employment relations.

I will discuss whether research based on interviews, where the researcher does not participate in the daily working lives of the informants, can and under what conditions be qualified as ethnographic research. I will discuss the difference between qualitative open-ended interviews and ethnographic interviews and argue that thorough understanding of the way workers construct meaning and stability within their working lives that are characterised by high degrees of uncertainty and ambiguous employment relations can only be gained through conducting ethnographic interviews.