



## Book Review

# Tommy Isidorsson & Julia Kubisa (eds.): Job Quality in an Era of Flexibility. Experiences in a European Context, Routledge, 2019<sup>1</sup>

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The idea behind this book is thrilling: If we presuppose that we since a couple of decades live in an era of flexibility in working life – in which way has the quality of jobs been changed? Now, since a long time, we know that the concept of ‘flexibility’ is of various meanings and often deceptive (Furåker et al. 2007; Skorstad & Ramsdal 2016). It is strongly value laden in that everything that is flexible stands out as something good and every word combined with flexibility becomes a good word – wage flexibility, organizational flexibility, time flexibility, flexible labor market, flexible working life. Who can be against flexibility? Who can call for three cheers for rigidity? As a starting point for the book, the editors still assume that flexibility for employers in private as well as public sector is an inevitable development. The usual arguments for this are referred to: globalization, the necessity of lowering costs in companies due to stiff competition, and limiting the costs of the public sector. So far, we have heard it before. In spite of this resignation, their reasoning soon takes an interesting and important turn: Which are the consequences for the labor market and work environment of such a development?

In the introductory chapter, the account is nuanced through presentations of a model of job quality and two models of flexibility. They are said to be the starting points for the book. One of the flexibility models has been suggested by me (Karlsson 2007) and it rightly plays a minor role in the book. It asks ‘for whom is flexibility good and bad, respectively?’ with the point of departure in the idea that if you are to *have* flexibility, I must *be* flexible – and the other way around. Dan Jonsson’s (2007) reasoning in positioning the concept of flexibility in a number of relations is much more important. Somewhat simplified, this is the basis of his typology:

- Flexibility is wanted variability
- Stability is wanted nonvariability
- Instability is not wanted variability
- Inflexibility is not wanted nonvariability

The idea is that here too flexibility is always flexibility for someone, it is a relational concept: What is flexibility for employers (often) brings about instability for employees – and the other way around; and what is stability for employers (often) brings about inflexibility for employees – and the other way around. Unfortunately, this powerful

<sup>1</sup> You can find this text and its DOI at <https://tidsskrift.dk/njwls/index>.

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theoretical device is not used consequently in the chapters of the book, why many analytical possibilities are lost.

The model of job quality is taken from the principles suggested by Muñoz de Bustillo et al, the point of departure of which are ‘those attributes of work and employment that have a direct impact on workers’ well-being’ (2011: 470). Basically, it contains three dimensions: one is quality of employment (e.g., type of contract and working hours), another is quality of work (e.g., autonomy and risk of accidents), and the third is a combination of the former dimensions (participation and learning at work). This typology is more important than the flexibility models, but still must be said to be underdeveloped in the book as a whole.

The other chapters are empirical and are made up of case studies in organizations and occupations in Great Britain, Poland, Belgium, and Sweden. They take us to a number of interesting workplaces, like police stations (Scholarios, Hesselgraves, and Pratt), parcel delivery (Newsome, Moore, and Ross), hospitals (Kubisa), distilleries (Mendonca), call centers (Zielińska), and several organizations employing agency workers (among others, Strauss-Rats and the Swedish world-leading researchers within the area, Håkansson and Isidorsson). The editors stress that the studies have been performed in a social situation bearing the stamp of the severe economic crisis of 2008. It brought about diminished political interest in job quality in favor of job quantity and legitimizing unsecure jobs within the framework of an ideology of flexible employment (chapters by Stephen Bouquin, and Dragoș Adăscăliței and Dederico Vegetti).

Instead of giving an account of all the chapters, I present some conceptual innovations or concepts that I think should be used more than they are in social science, namely ‘bogus flexibility’, ‘extensification’ or ‘overflowing work’, ‘dependent self-employment’, and ‘flexiquality’. The concept *bogus flexibility* is coined in Julia Kubisa’s chapter ‘For the sake of care. Nurses’ struggles for job quality in the context of flexibility arrangements: the case of Poland’. She discusses the question what has happened to the work of nurses as a consequence of the flexibility practices that have been introduced into Polish health care in order to effect economies since the end of the 1990s. The number of nurses have been cut down drastically without the number of patients or the need of care having diminished. At the same time, wages have been kept low, hardly making it possible to make a living. Considering the flexibility of employers and on the grounds of freedom of choice, there are now three different forms of being attached to a care institution. One is, of course, as an ordinary full-time employee, the second in a civil law agreement, and the third as self-employed. The latter two often concern part-time jobs without worker rights or social-political protection. Due to the low wages, it is not possible to earn one’s living on a full-time job, why the nurses have also both one and two part-time jobs on a civil law basis or as self-employed. The result on their part is instability in their (working) life.

Thereby, we could expect the employers in Polish care institutions to enjoy a high degree of flexibility. However, according to Kubisa’s analysis, this is not the case – especially not in the long run. Intensification of work and the nurses’ lack of autonomy entail that they cannot take care of the patients at the level needed and that they wish to uphold. Quality of care is undermined, making it impossible for the employers to reach their goals in that regard. Instability is the result also on their part. When Kubisa puts the question ‘flexibility for whom in the Polish health care system?’ the answer is: Not for anyone. It is a bogus flexibility that in practice means instability for everyone.

*Extensification* is the common analytical feature in Dora Scholarios', Hannah Heselgreaves', and Raymond Pratt's chapter 'Quality of working time in the police. The experience of shift extensification for officers and staff'. It deals with unpredictable or instable aspects of working time that have their origins in employer needs. In this study of British police, it more specifically concerns unplanned extension of shifts in opposition to, for example, payed overtime. Have we not all taken part of fiction in films and books about police officers who constantly end up in conflicts with family and friends because their work requires their time without they having been able to plan for it in advance? It turns out to be a dramatically rewarding theme that is grounded in reality.

The study shows that unplanned shift extensification is a widely spread phenomenon, especially not only among police officers but also among control room staff. It is especially not only common at the end of shifts but also through employees being called into work earlier than according to the roster. The extensification of working time is in conflict with EU recommendations, but occurs as a matter of routine. For the employees, it entails problems with sleep and recovering from work, as well as a constant instability in the relation between work and life outside work. It is very difficult to be able to make decisions about spending time with the family or plan leisure activities during such conditions. The employer, on the contrary, enjoys thereby a considerable measure of flexibility.

*Dependent self-employment* is one of a whole cluster of similar 'flexible' constructions on the labor market, for example, what is called bogus or sham or simply false self-employment. The phenomenon is analyzed in the chapter "Supply chain capitalism". Exploring job quality for delivery workers in the UK' by Kirsty Newsome, Sian Moore, and Cilla Ross. Deliveries of packages has grown to an important business due to the strongly expansive e-commerce. The authors have found three types of relations between parcel delivery workers and employers: one is here too traditional employment, another a mix between such employees and those who formally are self-employed and in which both groups are stationed at the same depot. A third form is when the parcel delivery workers work from their own homes and deliver the packages using their own cars on assignment from a company. Everything and everyone is supervised in real time, including the cars and the packages, but the difference is that the self-employed are not payed per hour according to tariff but per delivery. In practice, this means that they have to make considerably more deliveries than the employed delivery workers.

Through the construction with self-employed, employer risks can be transferred to the self-employed worker, who have to defray the costs associated with failed deliveries when they have to return to the customer later, as well as for the time it takes to load, unload, and drive the car. The delivery companies escape the costs for the porosity of the working day – the package delivery workers have to take on those themselves. To the flexibility that this provides the employers with comes that they do not have to worry about other costs that normally are involved in employment. Pensions, sick leave, finding substitutes when needed, and so on – all such costs have to be borne by the self-employed. The authors also define dependent self-employment as 'a contractual mechanism through which employers transfer the risk of the social costs of employment onto the individual worker, crucially removing access to employment rights' (p. 82). One criterion of self-employment is, further, that there is a big measure of autonomy. Such is not the case here. The parcel delivery workers are tied to one single company, they are constantly supervised and have to comply with the orders they get to continue getting



assignments. They really are dependent, although they formally are self-employed. They pay the flexibility of the employer with their own instability.

The last concept I wish to mention is *flexiquality*, which is introduced in the editors' finishing chapter. This combination of flexibility and quality is regarded as an alternative to the in practice unsuccessful combination of flexibility and security – flexicurity. The idea is, then, to unite employer flexibility with employee job quality. A problem with this concerns what happened to the question 'flexibility for whom?'. It seems to have suddenly disappeared. Or is there an underlying idea that high job quality automatically brings about flexibility for those enjoying such jobs? In any case, the authors emphasize that flexiquality presupposes strong trade unions and thereby a strong collective voice, behind which there is more power than is the case presently. I do not have any quarrel with this, but I want to add the importance also of informal power and resistance at workplaces (Axelsson et al. 2019).

The editors' conclusion accentuates that a change of perspective is needed for flexiquality to be reached: Instead of studying how job quality is undermined by flexibility, we should examine aspects of job quality to study flexibility in order to find flexiquality – a solution that is good for all parties. These conclusions ought to be related to the book as a whole. I mentioned that the theoretical resources that are presented in the introductory chapter do not characterize the book – they are only mentioned in passing in some chapters and not at all in other chapters – makes it difficult to find a systematic answer to the question how flexibility has influenced job quality in Europe. At the same time, that would perhaps be to ask too much. We have to be content with a number of separate case studies, of which many are highly interesting in themselves. However, it is worth noting that it is not possible to find a single example of flexibility on the labor market or in work organizations being good for employees. Instead, employer flexibility has grown strikingly since the crisis of the 1980s at the same time as employee job quality has diminished. According to the authors of the book, there is a causal relation here: the deterioration of job quality is dependent on mechanisms that have strengthened the employers' flexibility. Perhaps can the editors' plea for flexiquality appear as a pious hope against that background. But it is also possible to interpret it as an audacious research program.

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