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Source: *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation*, Vol. 10, No. 2, The Precariousness of knowledge workers (Part 1): hybridisation, self-employment and subjectification (Winter 2016), pp. 50-67

Published by: Pluto Journals

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/workorglaboglob.10.2.0050>

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Dimensions of precariousness: independent professionals between market risks and entrapment in poor occupational careers

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the multifaceted precariousness of independent professionals through a qualitative analysis based in the urban area of Milan (Italy). It supports the hypothesis that at a more advanced stage of independent professionals' careers, the analysis of precariousness as a market risk can be enriched by adding the concept of 'entrapment' in vulnerable working paths and working and living conditions to the definition of poor occupational careers. Entrapment can be considered as the long-lasting condition of a large and weak part of young-adult independent professionals beyond the first stages of their careers. Our fieldwork confirms the widespread fragmentation of careers and increasing difficulties for young professionals to improve their positions due to structural economic and organisational changes. Four career dynamics of independent professionals emerge from the qualitative analysis – successful, dynamic, entrapped and temporarily interrupted. Career strategies play a major role in determining successful outcomes, but social relations are confirmed as also crucially important for job success, providing professional networks, welfare support and 'local professional integration'.

Independent professionals' careers: an exploratory study

For at least 30 years, the processes of economic and social change in advanced capitalist economies have been dramatically increasing labour flexibility. Even independent

professional work, traditionally performed with professional and organisational autonomy and implying a (more or less) wide portfolio of clients, has been affected by increasing flexibility and precariousness. This has been the case especially when the work takes the form of solo self-employment and freelance work, connected to ever-stronger external direction by, and economic dependence on, a single client (Kalleberg, 2001; Muehlberger, 2007a, 2007b).

In many cases, the growth of these specific forms of independent work is connected to the more intense recourse by firms to outsourcing and contracting-out strategies for the recruitment of skilled knowledge workers (Muehlberger & Bertolini, 2008): strategies which often disguise forms of economic-dependent work which not only expose workers to the risk of *precarity*, defined as discontinuity in employment and in access to economic resources (Berton, Ricchiardi & Sacchi, 2012), but also to the risk of *precariousness*, defined as the subjective condition permeating all aspects of individual and social life due to uncertainty (Armano & Murgia, 2013)¹.

Outsourcing and contracting-out practices, increasingly blurring the boundaries between dependent employment and self-employment, are especially widespread in Southern European countries (Oostveen, Biletta, Parent-Thirion & Vermeylen, 2013) – and particularly in Italy on which this article focuses – because in these countries self-employment has traditionally been much more important.

Addressing the issue of precarity and precariousness in independent professionals' careers is difficult for several reasons. Firstly, the area of independent professional work, exposed to erosion of its traditional distinctive characteristics – autonomy and economic independence – in the new knowledge occupations, is difficult to define: labour market and contractual positions and the national regulatory norms under which they can be performed are not enough to delimit the area of inquiry precisely, and this is true not only across countries but also across occupations within the same country (Pedersini & Coletto, 2009). The literature relies on empirical definitions of the occupational area under scrutiny, studying specific sectors and/or professions (Fraser & Gold, 2001; Storey, Salaman & Platman, 2005; Osnowitz, 2006). According to the literature, however, these workers usually have the following features in common: they have a commercial contract or a 'service contract' rather than an employment contract; they depend for their income on a main contractor and have little or no real autonomy in running their 'business'; and they do not have employees (Oostveen, Biletta, Parent-Thirion & Vermeylen, 2013). This is a highly heterogeneous group in which workers usually have highly skilled and well-qualified jobs in professional, consultancy, social and personal services (Horovitz, Calhoun, Erickson & Wuolo, 2011; Kitching & Smallbone, 2008, 2012; Rapelli, 2012).

Secondly, studies often devote special attention to workers in the first phase of their occupational careers. They investigate how independent professionals deal both with the risk of precarity and precariousness and their strategies for building, on the one hand, continuity in employment and access economic resources and, on the other, projects in other life domains. These studies highlight, for both aspects, the crucial role

¹ The concept of precariousness, generally speaking, involves not only instability and lack of protection but also insecurity and social or economic vulnerability (Kalleberg, 2009).

of networks of informal relations, personal and family resources, trust and social capital (Bertolini, 2003, 2012; Fullin, 2004). The focus is however mainly on the potential risk of job loss, or of fragmented employment trajectories with alternating periods of work and even work overload and periods of no or poor employment.

Thirdly, the issues of precarity and precariousness in independent professionals' careers are difficult to analyse because of the high heterogeneity of situations which affect the labour market functioning of some specific occupational areas and the conditions under which the risk of precarity arises.

This article looks at independent professionals' careers from the perspective of their representations of work and experiences. It is based on a qualitative survey carried out in 2013 in the Milan urban area, of around 70 young adult professionals with at least five years of seniority: in traditional liberal professions, in technical services consultancy to companies, in creative and information and communications technology occupations, in the metropolitan finance economy and in welfare services². In the metropolitan area of Milan, the demand for professional labour is particularly high because of its urban economic system concentrated on advanced services. The underlying hypothesis is that when considering advanced stages of independent professionals' careers, along with the ideas of precarity and precariousness, the idea of 'entrapment' in the vulnerable working paths that define poor occupational careers should also be taken into account (Ranci, 2010; Ranci, Brandsen & Sabatinelli, 2014).

Our aim is to contribute to the literature on independent professionals' careers with an analysis of their actual conditions. This analysis has to consider those achievements – in working conditions and profits, in autonomy and economic independence, in satisfaction and professional consolidation – that, after some years of seniority, are important for success, beyond employment continuity. Indeed, from this perspective even those independent professionals who have experienced continuity in employment may be vulnerable to precariousness due to the poor consolidation of their professional careers and achievements.

The article is structured as follows: the next section briefly overviews the Italian case. The following section presents a typology of independent professionals' occupational careers based on analysis of the interviews, and the final section discusses the main factors affecting entrapment in poor occupational careers.

Independent professional work in the Italian case

In the European context of labour flexibility promoted over the last 25 years, Italy is an interesting case study. In line with the European 'partial and selective' strategy of deregulation (Esping-Andersen & Regini, 2000), in Italy deregulation of the labour market has progressively extended the use of temporary employment, while leaving untouched the regulation and guarantees for those hired on permanent contracts (partiality), that is to say the deregulation process has not involved the traditional

2 Interviews were carried out for the project 'Youth and Deficit of Representation: The Transformations of Work and New Social Risks in Milan' financed by public funding. Overall, the interviewees were young adults who had already left home and had an independent lifestyle, and mostly worked as freelancers; a good half of them were childless even though living with a partner, and about one in five was single.

regulation system but has been to the detriment of new employment forms. This has especially affected younger entrants into the labour market (selectivity) (Barbieri, 1999; Samek Lodovici & Semenza, 2008)³. Differently from other countries, however, in Italy since the mid-1990s, the growth of temporary employment has been relatively limited. Instead, a peculiarly Italian path to flexibility has emerged: the consolidated exploitation of self-employed labour in order to circumvent the regulation of dependent work (to avoid the legal duties and taxation regimes of dependent labour) has fuelled the growth of diverse forms of individual self-employment that are only formally independent (Barbieri, 1999; Reyneri, 2011; Ranci, 2012). The outcome has been an increasingly significant role and rapid growth of the different forms of independent work based on service contracts and one-off jobs carried out on an individual basis, and a blurring of the boundaries between dependent employment and self-employment with regard to working conditions. This trend has been favoured by structural changes in the economic system and in the labour market, as the progressive shift towards a post-industrial economy based on the service sector – which implies a different organisation of work – has redefined the structure of employment opportunities and required new forms of employment (Barbieri, 1999).

More than in other countries, in Italy such structural changes have strongly affected skilled occupational groups by promoting intense sub-contracting, outsourcing and externalisation practices. In Italy, indeed, the (pseudo) self-employment of professionals is an important flexibility tool for firms. It enables them to utilise trained (young) workers for complex tasks without bearing the costs of employing them on permanent contracts. They are, however, systematically excluded from the system of guarantees and social rights (Berton, Ricchiardi & Sacchi, 2012).

Because of difficulties in defining the independent labour actually affected by such changes, it is also difficult to assess its importance for employment. A recent study (Oostveen, Biletta, Parent-Thirion & Vermeylen, 2013) estimated that in the EU-27 self-employed workers amount to about 12% of total employment, with 8% having no dependent employees. The ‘economically dependent’ independent professionals – i.e. those working for a main client on whom they are economically dependent, often with very limited organisational autonomy – are estimated at about 1%, with wide differences across countries. Italy, Greece, Portugal, Cyprus and Eastern European countries show the highest incidence (between 1.5% and 2.5%), whereas the proportion is much lower in continental Europe.

In Italy, self-employment is more widespread than the EU average – about 25% of total employment – and is for the most part made up of people working on their own with no employees (approximately 70%). Even if national studies do not precisely focus on independent professionals, they estimate that 5% of the self-employed work in a state of *de facto* subordination and that 35% of these workers experience some restriction on their organisational autonomy (Fellini, 2010; Mandrone & Marocco, 2012; ISFOL, 2013).

³ Only in 2014 did the so-called Jobs Act Reform also affect open-ended contracts, reducing traditional guarantees for new permanent employees.

As for their profile, the many studies of the dependent self-employed in Italy depict a highly differentiated situation that involves mainly youth and young adults, often women, especially in metropolitan areas, and jobs in the tertiary and public sector. Intellectual and technical occupations and medium- and high-skilled workers in service occupations are then especially involved. The heterogeneous and, in many cases, precarious/insecure careers of these self-employed workers unfold both inside and outside firms within a fragmented domain populated by real and 'bogus' freelance professionals, and different forms of independent work on specific projects envisaged by the Italian regulation ('*collaboratori a progetto*', '*collaboratori coordinati e continuativi*', etc.⁴).

Entrapment: a widespread condition beyond youth and precarity

As discussed in the introduction, in a post-industrial context, many independent professionals, far from preparing for the consolidated occupational careers that their older colleagues could pursue in the past with well-established, highly-skilled and socially-recognised occupations, have been increasingly exposed to the risks of the market and to life precariousness and have to rely heavily on their own personal, familial and social resources (Gorz, 2003; Morini & Fumagalli, 2010). In the study of independent professionals' careers, therefore, the issues of continuity in employment and in access to economic resources, and of transitions from work to non-work with a lack of social protection are crucial for understanding their living and working conditions, as well as their strategies for developing their careers and identities in the labour market (Murgia, 2012). Here the concept of entrapment becomes relevant. While this has been used in the study of some atypical forms of employment, such as temporary subordinate contracts, and has become consolidated in the literature with the concept of instability, in the study of independent professionals on the blurred boundary between employment and self-employment, this concept is only rarely explored. In the study of atypical forms of employment, entrapment is usually defined as the 'bad' scenario of remaining in temporary contracts or exiting employment while failing to access stable contracts and is generally used in relation to young people at the beginning of their working careers. In this literature, the main question is whether non-standard forms of employment are traps or bridges to permanent positions (Gash, 2008). This definition, which focuses narrowly on the transition to a stable contract and mostly looks only at young people entering the labour market with non-standard contracts (Scherer, 2004), cannot be applied properly to independent professional workers due to their non-subordinate position in the labour market: therefore, a permanent position cannot be regarded as a measure of improvement for this occupational area at all.

4 These are just a few examples of the several forms of regulation of (semi-)independent work that exist only in Italy, and can be situated between subordinated employment and independent self-employment. A literal translation (which might still not be clear to non-Italian readers) renders these as 'collaborators on project' (work with a contract which establishes a single professional task to be completed with autonomy in a certain period) and 'coordinated and continuous collaborators' (work under the client's organisational coordination, with autonomy and time continuity).

We considered it suitable to extend the concept of entrapment to young-adult independent professionals on the basis of the analysis of interviewees' careers. What does entrapment mean in the case of independent solo self-employed workers? How can entrapped self-employed careers be identified? To answer these questions, we differentiated our interviewees' careers in terms of degrees of success achieved from the beginning of their professional activity.

The qualitative interviews with independent professionals⁵ enabled us to explore the characteristics and conditions of their working status and the dynamics of their career development. Both objective and subjective dimensions were considered in order to analyse their careers: on the one hand, their earnings at personal and household level, different degrees of professional autonomy, diversification of the client portfolio and professional achievements; and, on the other, their professional identity and the perceived chances of career improvement.

The qualitative analysis identified four types of professional careers:

First, there are *successful careers* that have achieved significant professional goals in terms of economic and working autonomy, and shown progressive improvements, fulfilling interviewees' expectation at the beginning of their professional activity.

Second are *dynamic careers*. By contrast, these have achieved only limited results as regards increased remuneration and enrichment of job content, but have nevertheless shown some significant improvements in relation to job autonomy and client portfolio. These careers have achieved only some initial professional goals; however, they show clear potential for further progress and overall enhancement.

The third category, *entrapped careers*, was the one to which the majority of the interviewees belonged. Entrapped careers appear stagnant, without any significant occupational or economic progress since the beginning of the professional activity, and also without sound chances of possible improvement in the foreseeable future: here, expectations were not fulfilled.

The fourth and final category, *temporarily interrupted careers*, distinguishes a residual small group of unemployed professionals, who after some years of fruitful careers have discontinued their professional partnerships and are currently out of work.

We focus here on the entrapped careers, because they represent the largest and most critical category. These involve young-adult solo self-employed workers who, after a career of at least five years, have experienced professional failure without finding, or in some cases even searching for, any alternative. Their earnings are low – mostly between

5 The in-depth interviews with professionals, lasting 1.5–2 hours on average, consisted of detailed self-reported careers, including information on education and training, the first job and the most relevant career stages until the current status. Those elements that the respondents considered decisive for their career development were coded and analysed using N-Vivo software, together with information on their social and job relations and on the use of web and social media for professional purposes. This method, although limited by the general bias that is always present in the case of self-reported histories, proved to be very effective for a rich reconstruction of career dynamics.

15,000 and 25,000 euros net per year – and, above all, not only have their incomes failed to progress over time but neither has their professional responsibility and autonomy or job satisfaction. None of these dimensions seems to have any real potential for improvement in the future. These workers are specialised freelancers who have invested a great deal of time, energy and resources in their own education and training. In spite of very limited achievements, they generally like their jobs, at least as they should be in principle and as they imagined them at the beginning of their careers. Therefore, they experience disappointment because they are currently falling short of their professional and personal goals. They lack occupational alternatives, because they are not searching for any, since they like their profession, or because they do not want to change because they believe that they still have a chance of fulfilling their goals, or because they simply put up with the situation and try to obtain some limited improvements in their working and life conditions.

Like many independent professionals (Mingione et al., 2014), the ‘entrapped’ find it difficult to imagine a different work career because they are strongly tied to the social identity of the independent professional: they consider themselves exclusively as independent qualified workers⁶. Moreover, it appears hard to move from an independent career to subordinate employment because the current economic crisis and more general changes in the labour market (flexibilisation) and work organisation (outsourcing) have created fewer openings. The less a subordinate permanent job is achievable (even one not related to the professional specialisation) and attractive (in terms of contractual stability and remuneration), the less likely freelancers are to change their career goals and expectations.

Remuneration is one of the most sensitive issues for freelancers. On the one hand, it may fluctuate depending on the market conditions in which they operate; on the other, it is one of the main parameters by which freelancers measure success or failure. In the case of those in entrapped careers, the remuneration is often very low. It is one of the most difficult issues which a significant part of self-employed labour must cope with⁷.

I earn 1,000 euros per month on average after twelve years of work. I'm a graduate and I speak five languages.[...]. (Int. 75, F, 37, show business, music agent, entrapped)

I hope I'll be able to pay the rent until the summer, so that I don't have to go back to live with my parents. (Int. 81: M, 31, television writer, Copywriter, entrapped)

Although they are frustrated by how scanty their economic resources are, they nevertheless perceive them as sufficient to survive; needs and interests must be reviewed and restricted in order to adapt them to an insufficient income. In addition, in the case of entrapped careers, the issue of identity and self-realisation seems to prevail

6 This psychological attachment is, in some cases, also supported by the dynamics of the specific professional markets: some of these have been undergoing profound crises which make it more difficult to change the first and most desired professional path.

7 Some recent contributions underline the considerably higher risk of poverty among the self-employed, often exacerbated by a fear of the social stigma of failure which may prevent them from changing their independent activities even when they are unsuccessful (Lambrecht & Beens, 2005; Boutillier & Kizaba, 2011; Ranci, 2012; Rapelli, 2016).

(at least in the medium term) over the fulfilment of economic and professional goals as has been shown for independent professionals in general (Borghi & Cavalca, 2016).

I don't know how much I earn. I should ask my accountant. I think around 15,000 euros net. Enough to live on and survive. [...] More or less I can do the things that I like to do; I don't have expensive interests, so I'm quite well off. (Int. 55: M, 36, Social Research, entrapped)

Consequently, aspirations are also adapted and scaled down to the realistic prospects offered by an independent career.

As for aspirations, what makes me angry is that I don't have huge ones: I'd like to receive a little more job offers in order to work more in social research. (Int. 55: M, 36, Social Research, entrapped)

Entrapped careers were defined by the research team as those with a severe lack of progress since their beginnings: indeed, the freelancers in this category are often unable to achieve pay and working conditions better than those that they had at the outset, even when they have accrued increased responsibilities and time commitments. From the subjective point of view, many interviewees experiencing blocked careers seem to be fully aware of the lack of improvement and achievements over time and of their career failure.

In around 2006 I began to realise that there was something wrong with the professional world that I liked and had desired for a long time. [...] It was an endless repetition. When one short-contract finished, they began another one, without my ever seeing the prospect of change. (Int. 41: F, 35, Copywriter, entrapped)

Awareness of the lack of opportunities to advance in the occupational career also extends to expectations for the future, sometimes leading to a dramatic reduction in professional aspirations.

Right now there are no expectations. This period is very chaotic and I can't imagine things beyond this reality [...] My aspirations are to earn enough money to maintain myself and my family. It seems trivial, but now is not that simple. (Int. 81: M, 31, Television writer, Copywriter, entrapped)

The entrapment dynamic is also likely to be strengthened by the scarcity of job opportunities that independent workers perceive around them. In these cases, self-employment is not seen as the only form of work admissible as a matter of principle; it is considered to be the only possible way to work, in some economic sectors in particular.

As other studies conducted in Italy have found, in spite of the limited achievements and of the poor perspectives, it is very rare for solo self-employed workers to accept the principle of shifting from independent to subordinate work (Arum & Muller, 2004), especially when this implies changing job contents or sector. This seems to be equally the case for those experiencing entrapped careers, even though the interviewees considered this option to be quite unlikely because of the difficult labour market and economic situation. For the few interviewees experiencing entrapped careers and

wanting to find any kind of job with a permanent position, the professional identity linked to an independent occupation has little meaning.

[...] I am passionate about my work. I even work on Saturdays and Sundays, but the deterioration of working conditions is killing my passion. If someone offered me any job with a permanent contract, I would change. For me self-employment is not a plus, because you have to suffer a lot. (Int. 47: F, 35, Website graphic design, entrapped)

Beyond the inadequate remuneration, lack of improvements and limited professional prospects which define this category, entrapped careers are characterised by other specific features relating to autonomy, identity and client diversification.

There are considerable variations among the entrapped professionals in the degree of working autonomy, conceived as the actual possibility to self-organise job activities in terms of time, space and content that they can exert. Typically, those who must respect the company's work schedules use its technical instruments, remain on its premises, and experience the working conditions of subordinate employment (Mingione et al., 2014).

In principle, diversification of the client portfolio plays an important role in the professionals' working careers, because it means that they do not have to depend on clients' conditions in terms of remuneration, schedule and work organisation. Having only one client, or a dominant one, is a contradictory condition for independent professionals and clearly shows their weakness on the labour market. A particularly strong, continuous and dominant, if not exclusive, professional relationship entails the loss of this autonomy: work schedules and conditions become imposed by the client, which tends to transform the professional into a sort of employee but, obviously, without the related guarantees.

It is quite common in Italy – mainly in the traditional professional sectors, for example, among architects and lawyers, but also in the publishing industry – to find independent professionals working for and at a single company or professional studio.

Let's say I'm freelancer. Formally I've a contract on a project that is actually fictitious; it always requires my presence, I can't do it from my home. Let's say that in fact I'm totally structured by the company's work processes. (Int. 57: M, 49, Publishing sector, entrapped)

Being part of a professional firm without being an employed professional entails a lack of autonomy: the freelancers, in contradiction with both their formal status and their aspirations, must refer to the manager and cannot take significant decisions.

What I suffer from most is the lack of freedom in decision making; even if I'm a planning supervisor I must always pass by the chief, and this situation slows down my working time. (Int. 66: F, 35, Architect, entrapped)

With regard to the subjective dimension, the possibility to work autonomously is a very valuable (and relatively scarce) resource among independent professionals, and it is a constitutive part of their identity.

I'm solo self-employed with a VAT number, I don't aspire to employment contracts because I've realised that they make me afraid. This habit of managing my time freely is strong... (Int. 50: F, 37, Environmental sustainability consultant, entrapped)

I like to be able to manage the work autonomously. On the other hand, I'm anxious by nature and feel guilty when I don't produce as I wish; when it happens, I punish myself. The fact that I can manage by myself makes things more complicated because I'm more severe than any employer. (Int. 75: F, 37, Show agent, entrapped)

Inside independent professionals' careers: the dynamics of entrapment

Beyond the description of entrapment, this article aims to identify the factors that influence this dynamic and are widespread among freelancers. We look at social characteristics and resources, on the one hand, and at career development, on the other, using self-reported career histories, a very fruitful but still underused empirical tool in studies on independent professionals.

First of all, neither social characteristics nor working skills seem to be related to entrapment. In fact, this career dynamic traverses professional sectors and social categories: the self-employed with entrapped careers are very similar to the other professionals as regards educational attainments (most are graduates), seniority and age; neither professional skills nor capacities seem to differentiate their career outcomes.

By contrast, there is a very important macro-factor that contributes to entrapment. The restructuring of productive process and labour organisation has affected some of the professional sectors we included in the study more than others among both traditional liberal professions (e.g. lawyers, architects and the publishing industry) and new 'knowledge economy' professions (designers, web designers and consultants). They, in particular, have been structurally changed in terms of externalisation of production from companies to independent professionals. It was not just those who took the gamble of entering one of the risky 'new' professions in the knowledge economy, but even those who invested time and resources on qualifying in the liberal professions, typically considered as rather secure careers in the middle and long term, who experienced dissatisfaction, discovering the barriers that made it difficult to be recruited as an employee in companies or professional studios.

With regard to career analysis, the main element affecting the chances of the solo self-employed for fulfilling their professional goals is represented by career strategies, defined as the capacity of professionals to plan their careers, to implement strategic actions and to cope with problems. They are scarcely analysed in the literature on independent professionals, but proved to be important for those of our interviewed solo self-employed who had managed to develop successful and dynamic careers. By contrast, these strategies are lacking or have failed among 'entrapped' freelancers.

A first type of successful strategy emerging from the interviews is selection of the more convincing job offers, and refusal of freelance contracts or consultancies, or even jobs in dependent employment, which may not lead to satisfactory freelance activity. This requires a certain amount of courage to cope with the risk of losing profitable work opportunities, but, as part of a professional strategy, it proves to be effective.

I am a bit anxious, a fixed salary as an employee would have been a better choice. Also because I was already engaged and wanted to get married. Nevertheless, I much preferred the other option, which necessarily consisted of an independent profession. The external circumstances were certainly not favourable, but hard work was a viable road. Instead I chose what seemed to me the most interesting option, and at a distance of a few years, although the external circumstances have worsened, I'm glad I made that choice. (Int. 19: M, 35, Psychologist, dynamic)

Clients have to be selected in order to achieve good and regular remuneration and continuity in terms of professional contracts. Therefore, the better the position in the market, the easier it is for the solo self-employed worker to reject a job offer as a calculated and moderated risk.

I work for two Swiss agencies and an American one. I don't work with Italian agencies anymore because with the crisis they have become a disaster. The American company is very large and works with the whole world. (Int. 14: F, 33, Publishing sector, successful)

A position of strength in the professional market allows the self-employed professional to define a favourable and adequate remuneration by bargaining on an equal footing with clients, whereas many freelancers are forced by market conditions and their own weakness to accept clients' conditions.

In fact I don't feel that I'm much weaker than my clients; I've positioned myself in the high level of the market, that makes the difference. The important thing is to be able to position yourself in a favourable position, you're recognised as a top professional. (Int. 31, M, 33, Photographer, successful)

According to this strategy, a freelance contract is just a step towards the real professional goal; it is useful in terms of professionalisation (qualification, skill improvement) and of course of financial remuneration.

I received a call, then I got a contract. It lasted nine months, but the project didn't work so I searched for another project. My intention was find a job as a psychotherapist, so I did it just to earn. Then I sent some CVs to temporary agencies and they took me on here at [name of company], but in another branch office, in 2007. I did a year with a fixed term contract then with a permanent one. Then I started at the psychotherapy school, and then I did a compulsory internship in the [name of hospital] where I worked with a team, until October. (Int. 21: F, 32, Psychologist, dynamic)

By contrast, excessive caution proves to be a losing strategy: to keep a low but apparently safe level of remuneration seems to prepare and reproduce the entrapment condition; this strategy shows its limits in as a means of overcoming the career block.

On several occasions when I was at the limit of my endurance, I tried to ask for advice from lawyers in order to get as much as possible and go away, but then for reasons related to the family and to what my wife suggested – she told me to endure and to avoid a lawsuit – I dropped the idea. (Int. 38: M, 43, Communication accounts, entrapped)

The lack of a career strategy seems to have serious consequences: any alternative career path is seen as a gamble, due partly to the fact that the economic sectors are in crisis or transformation, and partly to the idea, more or less realistic, that a better working future is not achievable.

The structural problems of the professional labour market and the current economic crisis prevent professionals from elaborating a career plan.

[...] The next few years will be more and more tragic, so I definitely know that I have to imagine solutions, first of all for myself in order to earn money. I'm not thinking at all of specific strategies. (Int. 86: F, 35, cultural events organiser, entrapped)

Courage is decisive in the first career stages in order to become independent after a first period of professional training.

I started as an assistant for two years, then I went to an office that only did post-production editing for one year, then I worked as an assistant with another photographer for four years, a total of seven years. Then I started to work on my own. It took such courage [...] (Int. 31: M, 33, Photographer, successful)

Self-promotion is another effective and quite widespread tool employed to achieve a successful career. There are many different ways, informal and formal, to let one's professional skills be known: CVs, word of mouth, participation in public events and professional meetings, and of course Social Network Sites (SNS). Since the majority of the interviewees are involved in professional environments strongly focused on reputation, SNS often play the role of checking and reinforcing the information that has previously been spread through traditional relational channels. As already mentioned, an ample literature has drawn attention to social capital as a crucial factor fostering job success (Granovetter, 1973; Coleman, 1990; Lin, 1990; Burt, 1992). Our study confirms this crucial link between relational resources and career outcome: social relations directly affect the independent professionals' careers, since acquaintances, friends and relatives are useful resources in both work and the private sphere. In fact, social relations are sometimes used as strategic tools for career development, intertwining with the career strategies illustrated earlier.

With regard to our analysis, social relations are considered in two ways: as professional networks useful for career development and the expansion of activities and clients; and as welfare tools crucial for supporting professionals economically, in particular during critical periods (unemployment, job to job transition, labour market entry) and in the management of their private lives (household, work-life balance). Our research hypothesis considered the social network to be a labour market instrument crucial for pursuing a successful career. Weak and (in some cases) strong ties (Granovetter, 1973) are important for finding new opportunities and alternative clients both at the initial career stages and during the subsequent development of the career.

Being part of a relational network which includes other professionals and entrepreneurs is obviously a strong advantage for constructing an effective strategy. In fact, in our research we found several examples⁸ of social ties, both strong and weak, being used to find interesting opportunities to acquire new clients and enter a professional 'circle'. These occur mainly among the successful careers, which makes this factor crucial for positive career outcomes.

The relational level plays a decisive role in the process of career development. Building and maintaining good work relationships is a necessary but time-consuming activity, which must be nurtured over the years, because the professional network allows the solo self-employed professional to renew their clients. In particular, it proves to be important during the early stages of careers, when workers need to acquire initial professional services. The professional networks built up during studies at university or in the first working period are often used to implement professional careers. Personal relationships are also often employed for professional goals: through a friend or a relative, it is possible to get to know new clients or other professionals, and this opens up new work opportunities (Borghini & Cavalca, 2016).

The second feature of social relations, as welfare tools, is extremely widespread among all kinds of freelancers, crosscutting the four career groups. With regard to the successful (but also dynamic) careers, social relations are among the factors that contribute to the fulfilment of professional goals (Mingione et al., 2014). For example, the gift of an apartment by parents helps freelance workers to face the initial critical stages of their careers, and to accumulate financial resources useful for coping later with unexpected expenses or making professional investments (starting up a business, for example). In the case of the entrapped careers, this aspect of social relations has two consequences: receiving financial or logistical (non-monetary) support enables solo self-employed workers, on the one hand to overcome economic difficulties and organisational problems related to the work-life balance, and, on the other hand to persist in that professional career which represents at the same time both a dream and a nightmare, a sort of obsession. With the support of parents or relatives, professionals with entrapped careers are able to fight to achieve their goals or, looked at from the opposite point of view, are pushed to accept their entrapped professional destiny.

Our analysis of professionals' careers indicated that, as welfare tools, social relations are extremely important in shaping the tangible life conditions of independent professionals, while, at the same time, reinforcing their professional destinies as solo self-employed workers. In the initial career stages, financial and service support helps those who are going to succeed as well as those who will not be successful. In the former case, such support acts as a co-factor in growing career development, because it helps professionals to deal with difficulties and enables them to plan their futures. The same kind of help makes it possible for the entrapped professionals to tolerate precarious careers and low earnings and to continue along their professional paths even if these are unsatisfactory from some points of view. Somehow the support provided by families or partners acts as a factor of reproduction of that entrapment.

⁸ Because of space constraints, we cannot cite the several interviewees' references to relatives, friends, clients and colleagues who helped them obtain new professional opportunities.

Another important aspect is the bond between social relations and territory: relations have to be locally situated to be effective, and urban contexts, in particular cities with a strongly developed knowledge economy like Milan, are recognised as able to generate economic development and innovation through social ties within working clusters (Jacobs, 1961; Porter, 2000; Scott, 2007). Connected with social capital but analytically distinct is what we call 'local professional integration', another relational element which proved to be crucial for career dynamics among the interviewees. This integration takes the form of (continuous) participation in professional networks located in the urban area which is independent from the availability of effective social networks which, with the same potential strength, can support the successful development of independent careers. Such networking is often part of successful career strategies but is lacking among the entrapped professionals.

Some solo self-employed professionals have weak local networks, and this can be responsible for their difficulties in developing their careers. In particular, those who arrive as incomers (from other cities or the Milan province) find it hard to enter the consolidated and rather closed working networks which represent important means to find new job opportunities.

When I moved to Milan, I started working for a firm in the assessment of environmental impact. I found it through the Professional Order, because I didn't know any architects in Milan. (Int. 9: F, 35, Architect, entrapped)

The difficulty of contacting other professionals or possible clients, and therefore obtaining a favourable position in the labour market, limits the chances of finding the right way to pursue a successful career. Moving from one city to another entails the loss of social and professional relations which are strongly spatially located (Borghi & Cavalca, 2016).

In Rome I had several job interviews, there was a different network. Here in Milan I still can't understand how to behave, and the previous network connected to my friends in Rome is not useful. (Int. 8: F, 30, Architect, entrapped)

In a consistent pattern, respondents chose what city to live in as part of their professional strategy for career building. A professional might, for instance, decide to move to Milan, where many clients live and where other potential ones can be found.

I live in Milan and the choice was strategic because here I can move easily; many customers are based in Milan. (Int. 5: M, 42, Financial promoter, successful)

At the same time, the choice of the place to live constitutes only the starting point for more articulated strategies to achieve the right position in the increasingly segmented labour market.

Conclusions

Consistently with general trends, professional labour, traditionally a field with a high degree of work and organisational autonomy and with a wide portfolio of clients, has been affected by increasing precariousness, even after the early career stages have been passed. The younger generation of independent professionals, unlike their older

colleagues, have been increasingly exposed to market risks, often forced to be dependent on client(s), and to rely on their own personal, familial and social resources. This has been especially the case in Southern Europe, and Italy is thus a suitable case study.

The findings from our fieldwork confirm what is stated in the literature in relation to the increasing fragmentation of professional careers and the diffuse difficulty to gain and maintain professional position, due to structural economic and organisational changes, exacerbated by the economic crisis, and some additional crises specific to certain industries, such as publishing. Within this larger overall picture, however, we have distinguished (based on a qualitative analysis of career dynamics using more than 70 interviews) four types of independent professional career which can be used as an interpretative grid that could be useful for studying the same occupational category in other areas and sectors. These four career types are: successful, dynamic (on the way to fulfilment), entrapped, and temporary interrupted careers. Because they were the largest group in the sample and represent the most critical condition, we concentrated our analysis on the entrapped careers, defined as stagnant careers with no significant progress in the employment and economic situations nor any signs of potential improvement in the foreseeable future. The identification of this group represents an interesting contribution to the theoretical analysis of labour market precariousness. This analysis shows that entrapment goes beyond the well-known risk found among young people entering the labour market but constitutes a long-lasting condition among adult independent professionals who have already passed through that phase and have to face the impossibility of achieving their career goals. Among the independent self-employed, entrapment has been demonstrated to be a widespread condition, beyond youth and precarity, contributing to the heterogeneity of precariousness.

The analysis of our interviewees' narratives also showed that career paths of independent professionals do not seem to depend on gender, age, professional seniority, or working skills. Instead, the main factor affecting career outcomes proved to be career strategies, intertwining with the issue of social relations, which, in this sample, took the form of professional networks, welfare support within parental or kin ties and local professional integration. Professionals with entrapped careers lack these strategic and relational resources to find effective solutions and are forced to take a defensive approach. In these cases, the social and family networks feed this tireless resistance, contributing to reproducing the entrapment, in combination with structural factors, such as labour organisation and precariousness.

Entrapment, as a specific condition of independent professionals within the more general precariousness involving different categories of workers, has implications that suggest a need for policy interventions. Among active labour market policies, measures are currently proposed to support self-employment as a way to combat youth unemployment and social exclusion; such policies should be expanded to also address ways to strengthen the career development of independent professionals in older age groups in order to prevent the risk of entrapment. In particular, professional training and lifelong learning emerge as requirements for the solo self-employed, who need economic support for training activities (which could be dealt with, for example, by tax credits or allowances).

In Italy a law⁹ has recently been enacted, on training and other issues, that, for the first time, intervenes to regulate the 'new' independent professions (that is, those without Professional Orders¹⁰). Apart from the uncertain outcomes of its implementation, which is still ongoing, this approach – of regulating the unregulated professions – cannot be considered an easy solution, considering how difficult is the representation of young generations of professionals offered by the existing Professional Orders. Moreover, professions and working conditions are so fragmented that overall regulation would be very difficult, with the risk that it would be so broad as to be useless. Because careers are fluctuating between dependent employment and autonomy, there is a need for new and traditional Professional Orders and associations (and, indeed all the representative organisations in general) to go beyond the employee-independent worker dichotomy in order to contribute fruitfully to the development of effective and balanced social and labour policies.

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9 1. 4/2013 *Disposizioni in materia di professioni non organizzate* (legal measures on non-regulated professions).

10 Professional Orders are organisations charged by the Italian State with the regulation and supervision of single professions ('regulated' professions). They are self-governing institutions aiming at protecting the quality of professional activities carried out by professionals who normally have to be enrolled in professional registers.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We greatly appreciate the reviewers' valuable suggestions which allowed us to redefine some parts of the article, improving the quality of the analysis here proposed.