

Narrating well-being in the context of precarious prosperity: An account of agency framed by culturally embedded happiness and gender beliefs

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Abstract

This article sets out to critically examine the accounts of well-being produced by a middle-aged Swiss woman living in precarious prosperity. By taking on a feminist reading of the narrative on well-being, the article challenges the taken for granted assumption of the powerful agent in thriving societies. Insights from literature on happiness in nations and gender beliefs enabled addressing the woman's capability to exert agency, while acknowledging the influence of the context in which narratives are embedded. In addition, the presence of a non-national interviewer appears to be an incentive for the interviewee's compliance with cultural meta-narratives. The approach of well-being as 'agential flourishing' proved helpful in assessing the woman's capability on a gendered career path in atypical employment to deal with precariousness.

Keywords

Agency, culturally embedded happiness, gender, precarious prosperity, well-being

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Biographical notes on Céline's life and work trajectory

Céline, our informant, was born in 1968 in a two-sibling peasant family, where discipline was central in children's upbringing: 'So I was anyway brought up in an environment of scarce resources; you finish your meal, respect food, clean up after yourself so, you see, that's the general atmosphere.' She attended a three-year vocational training as a nurse and left her parents' home at age 19. She then started working on call mainly in palliative healthcare. She chose her mother's professional career, a nurse herself. Her contacts with family members, mother and brother, appear to be close and frequent: Céline's mother gives her daughter tips on how to write her CV when applying for job openings, Céline regularly plays tennis with her niece, and they all see each other once a week.

Struggling with her unsteady income and fluctuating work intensity over the years, Céline was later led to pursue further education in reflexology. In 2008, at the time of the first interview, Céline was 40 years old and had been living for four years with a partner who is in training as a social worker. According to her declarations, the couple earns about 6000 Swiss francs per month, which is above the poverty line, but she acknowledges that she cannot count on it since Céline's income is uneven due to her work contract as part of a pool of the available/flexible workforce. Between the first (2008) and the second interview (2009), Céline pursues a professional specialization for health at work, gives notice at her job and then moves alone to another Swiss canton. There, she is receiving rather low unemployment benefits for one month, then she finds a part-time job as a nurse being paid less than she used to earn before. Contrary to their agreement, her partner does not join her at the new place. She describes this period as unbearable and, after one year, she decides to go back to the city where she previously lived. Upon return, she takes on the same job for the same employer within a week, she breaks up with her partner and she moves to her mother's home, as a temporary solution. By 2013, the year of the third interview, she has moved in with a new partner, is again unemployed and ready to take another job as a nurse on call. Céline's reported income and deprivations place her in the socio-structural category of 'precarious prosperity' (Budowski et al., 2010), namely the population situated just above the poverty threshold, struggling to avoid slipping into poverty while facing real threats of downward mobility.

Céline's work trajectory characterized by high flexibility and low social security accounts for her pathway into precarious prosperity. Her work resembles in many respects (i.e. poor pay, lack of employee's rights and unpredictability of working hours) one of the most critical categories of atypical employment.¹ Atypical employment saw a tremendous increase and feminization in many European countries, reaching 44% of total employment in Greece and Italy, 47% in Spain and 60% in the Netherlands (Tangian, 2010). As Bühlmann (2012) shows for Switzerland, atypical employment raises concerns about the possible effects on precariousness, dissatisfaction and withdrawal from social and political activities by flexible employees. Women are over-represented in most forms of flexible employment. For instance, in 2013, at the level of the EU28, 32.3% of employed women were part-time workers, compared to 8.7% of employed men, while in Switzerland the percentages were 60.3 and 13.3 respectively (Eurostat, 2015).

Agency, narrative and meta-narratives in shaping gendered well-being

Despite Céline's objective living situation, when asked whether her situation has improved or worsened since 2009, she narrates her well-being in rather positive terms. This makes us consider the influence of meta-narratives like 'gender beliefs' and 'culturally embedded happiness' to explain her evaluation of her own situation. The two concepts both shape the gendered space for agency in western societies, as our analysis of Céline's narrative will consequently show. The former concept, as Bühlmann et al. (2010) show for many western countries, Switzerland included, raises questions on the contradictions between the imperfect matching of egalitarian gender values and less egalitarian practices, as well as on differences in the existing gendered practices on the labour market and division of household chores. The latter concept refers to happiness as a national cultural value, as Van de Vliert (2012) suggests. Drawing on this research on culturally embedded happiness, we argue that the narrative of European citizens may in turn be biased by such pervasive cultural schemes, further arousing challenges for the understanding of personal agency in such situations of precariousness.

Attempts to reveal agency as embedded in and emerging from narratives are increasingly appealing in social sciences. Following Bruner (1987, 1990), Anderson (1997: 213) outlines that 'narrative is a discursive schema located within local individual and broader contexts and within culturally driven rules and conventions'. She rightly argues that in the process of narrating people become actors as their voices, by the way of giving meaning to their lives, enable them to make choices, to create new possible alternatives. The meaning-giving unfolds against the backdrop of prevailing cultural schemes which organize both our lives and our ways to tell about lived experiences. Taking on this view, our article seeks to address the agency of a middle-aged Swiss woman who lives in precarious prosperity. For the purpose of this article, we draw on Raibley's (2012: 1106) agential flourishing approach of well-being for whom a 'flourishing agent is a person who successfully realizes their values and is stably disposed to do so'. As Sointu (2005) outlines, well-being is an evolving concept whose meaning has shifted during the past four decades from the initial emphasis on structural and societal underpinnings pertaining to 'body politic' towards the contemporary trend of conceiving of well-being as emerging from individual agency.

Feminist researchers often emphasize the narrow space for agency of women in less-developed countries where gender inequalities and violence against women are salient, while the constraints of agency in the advanced societies are sidelined and their citizens' power of agency is taken for granted (Sulkunen, 2010). Taking on a feminist reading of Céline's narrative account, as a woman with a less advantaged socio-economic background, our article aims to understand her struggle to find a voice, while acknowledging the influence of the multilayered context framing the production of her narrative on well-being.

Switzerland is undoubtedly one of those developed countries characterized by high interest in equal opportunities for men and women. The study made by Nentwich (2006), based on interviews with professional change agents working within canton governments and public and private organizations, shows that change agents also construct

competing meanings of gender equality during their work. Other researchers also showed how overrated the argument of rational actors making free choices is and imperatively raised need to use the cultural context as a frame when talking about such situations. Gill (2007), for instance, cautions against the proclivity of considering that actors in developed countries, postfeminist societies as she terms them, have taken for granted freedom of choice and agency. She also reminds us to be aware of the cultural context in which actors are enmeshed and to engage critically while examining informants' narratives because '*critical respect* ... involves attentive, respectful listening, to be sure, but it does not abdicate the right to question or interrogate' (2007: 78). Building on this caveat, our article shows how the narrative of a woman in precarious prosperity reveals tensions between cultural schemas framing the production of narratives and the growing economic changes affecting her well-being and her struggle to find a voice.

The article continues with the discussion of the methodological frame used for the research on precarious prosperity in Switzerland in order to set the stage for the analysis of the informant's well-being. Next, it examines the ways in which multiple layers of the context in which the interviews took place between 2008 and 2013 can account for the shaping of the informant's narrative (Zilber et al., 2008). The meta-narratives of 'culturally embedded happiness' and gender beliefs appear to be the most revealing in this case. The article ends by addressing the possible biases such cultural schemas may induce at narrative level and how feminist researchers can deal with them in order to overcome dilemmas of agency.

Methods, context and data

The data used for this article stem from a larger comparative research project on precarious prosperity in Switzerland and Romania, entailing a quantitative survey, aiming to delineate the social category situated in between poverty and secure prosperity (Budowski et al., 2010), followed by a qualitative study using in-depth interviews with people from the prior sampled population. For the purpose of this article, we draw on interviews carried out with a Swiss middle-aged woman during the three waves of the study on precarious prosperity undertaken in 2008, 2009 and 2013. This woman's story enables us to draw insights into the patterns of precariousness unevenly distributed across sectors of a gendered labour market, as well as into the woman's coping mechanisms and resilience. The methodological value of our choice for this single case consists in its representativeness of the experiences of (feminized) professional groups characterized by high work flexibility and low social security.

Several empirical studies demonstrated that precariousness grows with the increasing participation in atypical forms of work as of the early 1990s onwards (Bühlmann, 2012; Jenkins, 2004). However, only scant research explicitly deals with the well-being of people belonging to this structural position of precarious prosperity. Our article addresses the need to disentangle the various layers of the complex context in which the informant narrates her well-being and their influence on her assessments in order to better understand the way agency is embedded in her narrative. The three interviews were collected at different moments in time and in different settings. The qualitative three-wave design is helpful in a number of ways: it permits understanding how everyday realities are

informed by past experiences and future anticipations; it enables a fine-grained understanding of constructs and definitions that the respondents apply; and, as emphasized by Thomson and Holland (2003: 237):

Following the narratives of a single individual over time alerted us to the continuity of narrative resources on which individuals draw yet the contingency of each ‘occasioned account’. Successive interviews gave us a better understanding of the individual, if not the ‘truth’ of that person.

The two first interviews were carried out by a single national researcher, while the last interview was carried out by a binational team (one Swiss and one Romanian researcher). Thus we use time and the bifocal lenses of the research team to unveil the multiple layers of the context in which the narrative is embedded. The native language of about 66% of the Swiss population is German, 23% French and 8% Italian (Baruffini and Origo, 2014). Our informant was chosen from the French speaking region, both interviewers being French proficient users. Interviews were afterwards fully transcribed and selected parts were translated into English.

Each interview lasted between an hour and an hour and a half and followed a similar interview guide structured around the main themes of well-being: family, social ties, housing, health, leisure, education and work. The aim was to capture the dynamic of well-being, as perceived by the informant, as well as his/her strategies to deal with the serious uncertainty with respect to securing livelihoods. The interviewers asked about the present living conditions, but also about the past events having led to the current situation as well as regarding the plans for the future. A Romanian researcher joined the Swiss team during the third wave of interviews and participated at the interview. Céline was informed that the presence of the Romanian researcher was motivated by the fact that the same research was deemed to be carried out in Romania and her consent would help researchers implement similar methodological tools enhancing cross-country comparability of the findings. The social encounter between researchers and interviewee is also part of a multilayered context in which the interview is embedded and will be, therefore, dealt with when interpreting Céline’s narrative.

Context and narrative

As feminist scholars point out, in order to critically engage in the analysis of this woman’s narrative, it is necessary to acknowledge the influence played by the broader socio-cultural context in shaping the production of the narrative. Zilber et al. (2008) identify there are three levels of reference for the account of the context in which the narrative is embedded, namely: (a) the direct relationships between researcher and informant during the production of the narrative; (b) the social group of reference within which the informants were socialized during their lifetime interaction; and (c) the broader cultural schemes guiding the purpose of the story and revealing its underlying meanings. All three levels are salient in the interpretation of Céline’s narrative and we will highlight their importance, while bearing in mind that they are usually entwined and difficult to disentangle. The fact that the interviews were carried out at three different moments in time makes it

easier to separate some contextual factors and their influence on the production of the narratives.

Unlike the two previous interviews, the third one, as noted, was carried out by a binational team in which one researcher was Swiss and the second was Romanian. These different citizenship positionalities in the field produced a new frame of reference that may have led the informant to adjust her attitude and adopt a less critical stance, compared with her previous concern that '[we] live in a society that unfortunately does not sustain morality, a viable ethics, and which replaces a value with others material and utilitarian', as she put it in 2008. In order to be consistent with commonly shared hierarchies in which countries are ranked according to their economic performance, Céline provided a different account in 2013:

We must stop complaining, because (*she laughs*) go to Romania! Just go for a little training in Romania, in a hospital in Romania, for example, where there is one soap for five rooms, and yet I'm nice, it's rather five floors, at a time. There are realities like this, we need to acknowledge them, I have to confront people with these realities because I can, because I can say I went, I was there, I saw it. I had not been in Romania ... I saw things because I travelled. Stop, what! And then try, I mean it is good, for the sake of everyone, to realize that yes, we live in an environment that is healthy, that is safe, it is beautiful, we have a beautiful country. We have money. (Interview 2013)

In this excerpt, Céline clearly addresses the existent discrepancies between countries, based on well-known inequalities among countries, as well as on the experience she gained by travelling abroad. Although she acknowledges that she has never been to Romania, she refers instead to her recent two months' sojourn in Cuba where she lived with her partner, as they were both unemployed in Switzerland. Her savings enabled them to pay for travel and accommodation in Cuba. At the same time, the labels she uses for her native country serve both as a way of reinforcing the schema of wealthy-healthy nation, and as a means to obliterate within-country inequalities, grounded on gender and class belongings, as she contends that 'it is good, for the sake of everyone' to accept it. The cultural ignorance the Romanian researcher² performed wittingly in this relational context led the informant to make explicit connections between these popular beliefs and the implicit assumption of her personal well-being. We further illustrate the role played by the context, especially by the cultural meta-narratives since they 'are not consciously acknowledged by the teller, nor do they appear explicitly in the text' (Zilber et al., 2008: 1054).

Agency and gender beliefs

In this section, we address Céline's power to exert agency with the purpose of enhancing her well-being as reflected by the informant's narrative on both work and family life domains. The stumbling on the professional pathway seems to be offset by Céline's rich ties (i.e. family, a new romantic relationship and friendships), which is contrary to expectations grounded in the unemployment literature (Paugam, 2006). What it is peculiar to her work trajectory is the fact that she is stuck in what is called atypical employment. Bühlmann (2012) offers an interesting account of the ways in which atypical employment in Switzerland is clustering in specific profiles according to both personal

characteristics and employment conditions pertaining to the workload, the duration of employment contract, the compatibility with daily and weekly social rhythms and the payment level. In this respect, Céline's profile matches the critical situation depicted by Marti and Osterwald (2004) with respect to the highly feminized precarious employment in Switzerland, encompassing mainly those workers having limited in time contracts, working on shifts or on call and receiving poor pay, further suggesting workers' high insecurity with respect to both planning future life and cushioning the negative effects of job loss.

The share of women in full-time employment is decreasing with age, whereas their participation in part-time or work on call is increasing especially as a consequence of their constraints in reconciling professional and family life in a context of insufficient provision of childcare services (Bühlmann and Schmid Botkine, 2012: 40). However, Céline's atypical work trajectory is not typical to the above mentioned pathway, since she does not have children and is not bound to fulfil other family caring obligations. Rather the structural changes in the gendered workplaces might be responsible for her channelling into this type of work, as shown elsewhere by Halford and Savage (1995). As narrative analysis shows, the strengths of her agential flourishing rest on her marketable skills, the organized or disciplined flexibility and in the fact that she perceives her work as embodied and difficult to alienate from her. First, as illustrated in the next excerpt, Céline perceives her skills as valuable and, in spite of her being unemployed, she could always survive by using her skills, beyond the formal market, in the exchange for food items.

Girlfriends telling me: but, Céline, you do not work, you help us, what can we do for you? I say, but don't worry! ... for me the principle of exchange, [for] me, money can disappear, it's no problem. I can live without money, there's no problem ... I can always share my knowledge, my skills, my work, I can always exchange it for a kilo of potatoes, for uh, for a bottle of wine, for a chicken ... At this level, it's true that I'm lucky. Because even if everything collapses, as I have a roof over my head, and as long as I have my hands to work with, I have the resources. It's very simple. (Interview 2013)

Provided that she has a dwelling, she does not worry about the achievement of other basic needs, as long as she can make use of her skills within her own network of friends and acquaintances and beyond. In a society that she criticized previously for placing too much emphasis on monetary exchanges, she critically addresses the meaning of commodified labour. She was stuck for several years in this atypical employment of work on call, without being entitled to benefits such as maternity leave, paid holiday or sick leave, and she is currently about to take up the same type of work in palliative care. While acknowledging the cross-country variation in institutions shaping *flexicurity* policies at European level, Lewis and Plomien (2009) show that flexibility at the expense of social security is salient in feminized work sectors. Céline's case is illustrative of the shortcomings of *flexicurity* policies. Activation policies and modern social security arrangements are core components of *flexicurity*. Although some evidence suggests that Switzerland could be a good performer in this field (Baruffini and Origo, 2014), the next interview excerpt casts doubts on Céline's access to unemployment

benefits and adequate support for improving her capability to make genuine choices concerning the advancement of her career:

Well, no, not unemployment ... no way, I will never go back to unemployment. I had my experience of unemployment, it's absolutely traumatic, it's absolutely degrading, it's absolutely ... uh, they push people to depression, unhappiness and dishonour. Uh, never again! ... It's like they can take away the days of your unemployment benefits if you do not comply with their rules, but if you are not given the rules from the beginning, then how do you deal with that? So that's why I'm saying ... that I guess that one who is already vulnerable for losing a job and for being in a precarious situation, finds himself/herself again in another unsuccessful attempt, since s(he) has done it all wrong again, when, in fact, the approach was all wrong. (Interview 2009)

Despite attempts to update her skills, Céline's job changes interspersed with unemployment/inactivity spells provide no clear evidence of an upward trend towards better jobs, as flexicurity ideology claims. However, the body work she is able to perform when taking care of persons with serious illnesses in palliative medicine gives a sense of worth in spite of the debatable demeaning character of body labour (Underman, 2011). She rather capitalizes on her embodied skills, as unalienable know-how:

I'm lucky to have skills, know-how that is there, in my hands. It is not in my head, it is in my hands. And I can always use it. As long as I have hands, I can still do my job. I do not even need a hospital to do my job. I can do without a hospital, without a ..., I can, all by myself. I can go, there, in the street and say: 'Look, I am a nurse. Do you need help, do you need health care? Well, I'm here. I can do it.' (Interview 2013)

Being aware of the negative impact of the erosion of labour regulation on the quality of life of such atypical workers, she is seeking however to positively adjust her discourse in order both not to drift away from the culturally embedded happiness scheme and to highlight her agential flourishing beyond the imperfections of the labour market. Health and care are eternal values and she is able to pursue these values through performing healthcare within and beyond the formal labour market as long as she can use her hands.

Finally, she perceives herself as highly responsible, mindful, respectful towards the principles of her job, and oriented towards disciplining her flexitime, based on her lifetime experience in such a flexible work: 'when you have lived all the time in an environment like that, suddenly you stop fearing change, and then, finally, on the contrary, one discovers the potential for creativity embedded in those conditions'.

After acknowledging the strengths of Céline's agential flourishing, we now address her weaknesses grounded on her belonging to gender and precarious prosperity. Increasing emphasis is put on agency as a measure of one's dignity within the contemporary society, as suggested by Sulkunen (2010). However, at the societal level there are widely shared cultural beliefs concerning men's and women's differential in agentic power, in the use of aggressiveness, men being also more likely seen as 'status worthy and competent overall and more competent at the things that "count most"' (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004: 513). These authors rightly argue that these hegemonic gender beliefs become institutionalized through different channels (e.g. public policy measures, mass-media, normative expectations) resulting in small biases that 'accumulate over careers

and lifetimes to result in substantially different behavioral paths and social outcomes for men and women who are otherwise similar in social background'. Following this stream of argumentation, it can be noticed that in different social encounters, women tend to produce narratives and to act in ways that comply with the expectations endorsed by these gender beliefs. This insight could shed light on the following excerpt from the interview with Céline. When asked about how she assesses her power of negotiation on a 10-point scale where 0 means 'no voice at all' and 10 means 'very influential', she chose 6 and further provided reasons for her assessment as follows:

Because I do actually work. Because I'm bold ... On the other hand, I could get much more involved. The professional situation, being employed in a team, oh well, it has to do with my desire for security in my private life. But I have also refused very interesting fixed jobs, building teams, service building, etc. I have always refused them because I found them too constricting but also because I didn't want to engage in them, as a matter of fact. On the other hand, I am bold, so I have something to say and I shall say it out loud. I do engage, after all, when there are surveys, and in our company there are often surveys, I do them. I even express my opinion, I am against anonymity, I commit to my identity and my role, and there we are. If there's a protest, I'll go, but I am not politically engaged, even if I could be, even if I think it is a solution to get things moving. Political engagement can be the only solution. There you are! (Interview 2013)

Gender is shown to play a role in the relationship between the overall level of happiness and the level of competitiveness of a country (Van de Vliert and Janssen, 2002). The authors seeking to examine the 'possible impact of culture-based gender differences in competitiveness on the happiness' (2002: 322) found that, in competitive societies oriented towards continuous improving and maximization of outcomes, a higher happiness level can be maintained only if women are less competitive than men, both in work and outside work settings. These insights into the gender beliefs about women as less competitive, with lower skills of management, provide means for understanding the narrative of Céline. She acknowledges, in the end, that although she has a voice, she has little effective power to alter the actual disadvantageous situation concerning the working conditions that directly impede on her well-being. While she thinks that political engagement could be the only way to change the state of affairs, she does not, however, engage politically, without further providing any explanation for this lack of engagement. But our tentative explanation is that gender beliefs are again leading to this.

In the realm of domestic life, the meta-narrative of gender equality is also shaping the story Céline tells. Beyond claims of egalitarian distribution of domestic chores, the latent meaning conveyed by the following excerpt shows that gendered practices in housework distribution is salient:

Because I'm not working at the moment it's clear, it's just me doing a little bit of everything. But then I have to fight with my friend to not do it. Because, he has an idea that, it's not because I am a housewife with no children, this is my actual job, it's not because I'm a housewife without children that I necessarily have to do housekeeping ... That's not ... it is not limited to that. So he wants to stay active there. So I cook because he can't cook, and as I had a restaurant. I ... I like cooking and stuff. So I cook, but he, uh, he, for example this weekend he is the one who does the dishes all weekend. Because he doesn't want it to be me who does it all the time,

that's why. And then, when I worked, I had a housekeeper. ... I have a woman in the neighbourhood. But then I told her that I was not working so there's no reason she came to work, but she kept the key, and as soon as I start to work, she will return ... and then certainly him, he doesn't have the *cliché* of the woman as housewife. (Interview 2013)

In this excerpt we can see how each sentence revealing the actual practices within the household distribution of tasks is contradicted through a reflexive attitude towards these facts. Each time she mentions herself *doing* something she is always adding a short sentence justifying her deeds in order to offset the uneven distribution of domestic chores between the partners. But the tension between egalitarian values she endorses and the gap in the realm of narrated facts within her household is obvious. This tension is perceived as progressively increasing and, at a certain point, it becomes necessary to solve the contradictory evidence between ideas and facts. Hence, Céline acknowledges that external help is needed in order to resolve this incongruence between egalitarian gender values that partners hold and their less egalitarian behaviours.

The 'culturally embedded happiness' scheme

The last sentence of the above excerpt leads us to consider the influence of the second meta-narrative. By claiming that her partner does not uphold the *cliché* of the unemployed woman as housekeeper Céline is guided by the happiness scheme, since endorsing such a *cliché* would imply that the man is valuing socially disapproved gender roles and this could harm the romantic relationship and accordingly negatively impact the partners' happiness (Stavrova and Fetchenhauer, 2012).

The most striking evidence drawn from the analysis of three interviews was the frequent use of the words 'happy' or 'happiness', especially in the interview from 2013, while in the prior ones references were made to 'satisfied' and 'satisfaction'. One can easily be tempted to draw conclusions on well-being based on a simple content analysis of the interviews. However, an interpretive analysis of the interviews, by taking into account also the meta-narrative context as well as the objective data provided by the quantitative part of the research, reveals dilemmas and tensions within the narrative, as illustrated by the next excerpt:

Yeah it really is, life is beautiful. For me life is beautiful. And then I have super interesting projects, uh professionally speaking. Well, indeed ... then I'll go see what I can do and then to emulate uh, because I actually love this freedom, so I need to keep this freedom of movement in order to do what I wa[nt] ... it is not even what I want to do ... in fact, is ... that the opportunities that come to me, and I am actually fortunate to be available. That is what is important to me. And that's surprising because, after all, that's life, but I'm doing it in the end – No matter how hard I try to do it differently, it didn't work. ... So, I go on like this ... I have no choice. And then it is like it is, but it is ... that's good. I am very, very happy. Voilà! (Interview 2013)

Céline is rather caught in this precarious situation and the 'freedom' she derives from the flexible work provides no clear indication that she holds power over her choices and her destiny: 'I live from day to day! I find it difficult to project myself. I really find it difficult to project myself.' The narrative revolving around freedom and well-being is the product of an ideological bias Céline does not explicitly acknowledge.

There is increasing evidence that happiness is culturally embedded (Van de Vliert, 2012) and dependent on countries' characteristics such as economic growth, type of climate and governance model. As a consequence, societies vary according to the level of happiness (Veenhoven, 1993, 2005). Alongside the influence of individual determinants on happiness (e.g. gender, age and marital status), one may expect that in countries where people are aware of the high level of happiness in a nation, their narratives tend to comply with this culturally embedded happiness schema. In addition, the presence of a non-national during the interview with Céline raised the awareness about the cultural distance between the researcher and informant and can be seen as an incentive for the informant's compliance with this happiness scheme. This needs to be carefully addressed when examining the informant's agential flourishing. Well-being, understood as the ability of people to lead a good life through planning and realizing the goals they value, is highlighted by Céline's further account of what makes up a good life and her emphasis put on happiness:

I think ... there are, there are plenty of things that can make a life good: being able to feel ... being already able to say you're happy, to be happy afterwards, to be healthy, it certainly helps, to be able to flourish, to be able to have a social life, to have a career, uh ... at last, I do not know, to feel free, I think that's what might make you feel accomplished, fulfilled, and then to have ideas, projects, to be active, to be able to ... not to have too many constraints in the end. And then even if there are constraints, well we must accept them. And then, and then indeed, here, once again, we are privileged on that. We only need to remind that to people who complain often, because they know that ... but it's true that they forget to really open their eyes and say, yes, it's true. Here, I can go out on the street in the evening, even if there are neighbourhoods that I know about [criminality risk], but otherwise there are no problems. If I want to go to the theatre, then I'll go. I mean, there are so many people who live differently. I lived two months in Cuba ... go live in Cuba, that ... is horrible. It's just horrible! (Interview 2013)

Although the objective indicators taken into consideration during the quantitative part of the study guided us to select Céline as one of the individuals situated in precarious prosperity, her narrative does not exactly meet this categorization. We carefully examined her discourse against the backdrop of the meta-narrative of cultural embedded happiness. According to such a cultural scheme, people living in happy nations cannot fail in pursuing this life-goal since everything is set up to accommodate individuals' needs. Happiness is central in her discourse on well-being. Health, self-realization, social life, professional career and coping with life contingencies are also important for well-being but they are outweighed by the propensity to choose the happiness as the default status or personal attribute. Switzerland is known to be one of the happiest countries in the world. Céline points to the need to remind those who are unhappy or unsatisfied with their lives. The reference to her travelling experience in Cuba is an additional piece of argument aiming to reinforce the happy nation scheme.

Happiness is generally seen as a major goal people pursue during their life, but often people's accounts of happiness can be misleading for researchers interested in well-being. Building on this observation, Raibley (2012) proposes to take into account the 'agential flourishing' approach in an attempt to surpass this difficulty of overlapping meanings of happiness and well-being in the narrative analysis. The author defines the well-being as agential flourishing in which happiness, both as episodic or as a stable

personal attribute, is shown to be a necessary and beneficial but not sufficient condition to achieve well-being. The flourishing agent needs to endorse values and to be oriented towards their realization through successfully invested efforts while also experiencing ‘appropriate emotional feedback on this entire process’ (Raibley, 2012: 1116).

It is also worth noting that while most studies on well-being conflate life satisfaction and happiness (Easterlin, 2005), others distinguish between them, while acknowledging that they are interrelated concepts (Raibley, 2012). More precisely, happiness is seen as the affective component of the multidimensional concept of subjective well-being, which also includes a cognitive assessment, namely satisfaction with life, whose content lies in the distance between one’s aspirations and outcomes (Gundelach and Kreiner, 2004: 361). These authors show that country characteristics and living in a stable relationship are the most important determinants of happiness, whereas life satisfaction, also dependent on the country of residence, increases especially when the individuals have a higher sense of control over the shaping of their lives. These changes in the narrative may be accounted for by considering the multilayered context in which the text is embedded. Based on these findings we can draw some insights on the effect of the second layer of context, namely the social relationships, on Céline’s narrative. She is indeed in a stable relationship with a man she describes as fabulous from the beginning of the latest interview, after having broken up with her previous partner, after a five-year relationship, a sequence which was captured during the second interview, in 2009. This new romantic relationship seems to play an important role in her account of happiness, but, as already stressed, happiness is not a straightforward indication of well-being.

Concluding remarks

Our article sheds light on the inner conflict experienced by a Swiss woman in precarious prosperity through addressing countervailing forces at societal level (i.e. the growing precariousness due to the spread of feminized flexible employment, and the prevailing meta-narratives of culturally embedded happiness and gender beliefs in the West). The mismatch between woman’s objective living conditions and her narrated well-being, situated in the broader context, led us to raise questions about the gendered power of agency in western societies.

Building on survey data from a screening questionnaire aimed at targeting Swiss households living in precarious prosperity, we further delved into the narrative produced by a woman belonging to the eligible population. The five-year span of the qualitative study enabled us to explore her life’s trajectories and transitions as well as to interpret the discourse in the context of past experiences and future projects. Researchers’ reflection on their belonging to different national/citizenship locations assists in debunking the myth of powerful agent in developed countries. It thus helps illustrate the obliterating power of broader cultural meta-narratives. The narrative analysis of three interviews with a middle-aged Swiss woman stumbling along her long-term career in atypical employment and living in precarious prosperity enables us to make some tentative conclusions about her power to act as flourishing agent. The latter concept allows us to challenge the taken for granted power to exert agency by citizens of thriving societies and to address their capabilities to improve well-being by tackling the structural constraints.

On the one hand, the woman has some leeway on opportunities to foster well-being as she draws on her professional know-how she perceives as embodied, and then she is stably disposed to perform healthcare work in spite of a deteriorating labour market. Relying on her personal network is a way to counter the erosion of labour market regulations and, to some extent, this could help her overcome the uncertainty of her living conditions. On the other hand, the woman fails to explicitly address the challenges of her being entrapped in atypical and precarious work.

This article provides insights into the unsettled relationship between agency, choice and well-being and argues that well-being accounts cannot be properly understood in isolation from West European pervasive ideologies of freedom, flexicurity, happiness and gender equality. Feminist researchers should further examine the role of such ideologies in the reproduction of gender and class inequalities through undermining the ability to exert agency by women belonging to lower categories of the social ladder.

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Notes

1. Atypical and precarious employment do not completely overlap. The former encompasses various non-standard employment relationships (e.g. work on call, night and weekend work, multiple jobs), while the latter refers to atypical employment combined with suffering and gradual withdrawal from social and political activities (Bühlmann, 2012). Although Céline's work is precarious in many respects, without her explicitly recognizing it as such, we use the former concept in order to prevent inconsistencies.
2. The second interviewer has lived several years in Switzerland and this immediate experience served as a ground for critically interpreting the meanings conveyed by the informant.

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