

**Social vulnerability approach and the transformations in the labour market. The impact of the instable jobs in the family structures<sup>i</sup>**  
(8137 words)

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**Abstract:**

During last decades in the European countries, some relevant changes in the labour market happened with the increase of unemployment and flexibility of job. These events put in crisis the welfare systems and determined the evolution of the new form of inequality. To analyse this complex change it is necessary to look at the family as a sphere where different job conditions are composed. The aim of this paper is to analyse the job instability and the relation between work condition and family condition, in order to study the evolution of the work-family system in the European countries. To analyse these topics we used the ECHP database. This paper uses the social vulnerability concept like a frame to understand the effects of the changes. In particular it focuses on the necessity to use the family as unit of analysis, in order to explore the relation between work condition and family structure. The social vulnerability concept is a good approach to analyse this topics because is a multidimensional approach (the principal interest areas are: income, labour, family structure, housing and care) and it permits to analyse the new forms of inequality. The multidimensional connotation of the phenomenon and the particular exposition of some family compositions put in evidence that there are many diversified elements characterising possible factors of social vulnerability. The increase in unemployment and unstable and atypical jobs, little-protected family forms, and the need to cut public welfare programmes are some of the syndromes extending the area of risk, and above all they contribute to triggering off processes that transform the risk into exclusion.

In the last decade Europe has experienced an intensification of the sociological debate on the transformations occurring in the labour market. As a consequence of the rise of the discussion, the debate has been enriched by numerous theoretical and empirical contributes. Particularly significant in this respect, are the strands of the literature that deal with the transformation and evolution of the various forms of work contracts.

The shift from the Fordist to the Post-Fordist production model has forced the researchers to respond to various questions regarding the changing attributes of employment.

The crisis that has hit the “salary-based society” as described by Castel can be considered as the starting point of new forms of social inequalities (Castel 1995). Also, in order to understand the ongoing transformations occurring in the labour market, it is important to consider the shift from a “labour society” to the “risk-society” as described by Beck (Beck 1999).

The increasing diffusion of flexible forms of employment has also shaped the perspective on the systems of employment-related guarantees and other forms of social protections. This transformation has been critical for those welfare systems (such as the Italian one) soundly built on salary-employment and thus largely based on employment-related social benefits (Ferrera 1998).

These changes have been responsible of growing uncertainty and instability for employees. Although is beyond the scope of this work to enter the debate on the flexibility of labour markets, it must be highlighted how the above mentioned reforms have determined an increase in the proportion of “atypical” work, too often characterised by deep instability.

In this complex and diversified context, in some countries some of the traditional inequalities linked to the labour market have worsen, especially for women and older workers that have lost their stable job (Schizzerotto 2002, Saraceno 2003).

More specifically, although in the past years women have increased their rate of participation in the labour market they have brought simultaneously to confront themselves with an increased number of difficulties in terms of professional advancements and economic stability. This mainly due to the increased popularity of the “atypical” work contracts. These contracts are more appealing to women because they often allow employees to better manage work-family balance but, on the other side, they often present significant disadvantages in terms of career development and salary levels (Reyneri 2002, Saraceno 2003, Fullin 2004).

Adults loosing their stable jobs have usually a very difficult time being re-absorbed by the labour market. This is largely due to the obsolescence of their skills and to the difficulty they experience in adapting to new working-models. Also, the difficulty is related to the demand for flexibility from the labour market that clashes with the culture of stability, typical of older generation of workers. (Migliavacca 2002, 2008, Fullin 2004).

Together with women and adults that loose their jobs, young workers are another category deeply affected by the ongoing changes in the labour market. The increased flexibility has

facilitated the entrance of young inexperienced workers in the labour market, especially in some areas characterised by low unemployment and fast growth. The question that many researchers are raising, it then becomes whether flexibility can trap workers in a vicious circle of uncertainty generated by precarious and unstable employment.

Without indulging in the ongoing debate between those authors that believe that these transformation represent a definitive turning point, and those that considers them only a transitory period, the richness of the literature on the issues related to the transformation of the labour market cannot be ignored. Despite this, very often this research suffers from a lack of rigorous empirical support in order to analyse the ongoing changes, in particular in relation to “flexible work”; thus two questions mainly arise: are the categories used to analyse these phenomena still valid and applicable? Are they sufficient?

This paper tries to address this issue with particular reference to those forms of employment so called “flexible”. In particular we try to define the operationalization of the concept of job instability and propose a analytical frame to analyze the relation between job condition and family structure. Also, by adopting a concept of “social vulnerability” it will try to give a better understanding of some phenomena related to instable and precarious work conditions. This paper has been inspired by a research project that aimed the different dimension of the social vulnerability in Europe.

### **1. Between typical and atypical**

The definition of “atypical work” is linked to a set of factors that have determined a change of perspective in the way work is conceived (amongst which the introduction of flexibility as a response too employment crises).

In the fordist period, work was considered in most instances a “unique” experience, or at least characterised by high levels of continuity and guarantees (in some cases a life-time experience.). In the Post-fordist period most of these elements are shaking. The most optimistic interpretations, emphasises the gain in flexibility the increased opportunities for individuals, as a response to the crisis of the traditional industrial system brought about by these changes. Despite this, negative interpretations of this phenomenon, focuses on the loss of all those elements, characteristics of the so called “traditional” employment that use to provide workers with a safety net of guarantees and protections.

At the end, it can be stated that the main differences brought about by the shift from a Fordist to a Post-Fordist productive model are concern with the reduction of the length of the work-experiences and of the guarantees offered to the employee. Despite this, it must be noted that given the complexity of the matter there can be many exceptions to this general trend

“Traditional” occupations, (those related to salaried/waged employment) are mainly characterised by permanent contracts guaranteed by a series of social benefits (sick-leave, maternity –leave and in some cases, especially for larger company redundancy benefits, and other similar protections). On the other hand “atypical” occupations are characterised by short-term contracts very often with no social-benefit or guarantee attached.

Clearly it would be impossible to classify all forms of employment within these two extremes frameworks. For example, part-time work can be seen as in between these two characterisations (short working hours but some guaranteed social benefits). Despite these exceptions it must be noted how, in some countries the polarisation between typical and atypical employments is particularly drastic, and intermediate forms of employment traditionally not very diffused.

## **2. The lack of stability**

The identification of the elements that characterise new forms of employment leads to one of the critical points in the debate on “atypical” work and defining a cross line between traditional and new forms of employment through the introduction in the debate of the themes of instability and of the precarious nature of employment.

Both in the literature and in the general debate “atypical” work can be defined indifferently as precarious or instable employment. This characterisation helps underlining the lack of stability that instead define traditional permanent employment and thus contributing to differentiate amongst the two.

The lack of stability it is mostly interpreted negatively in the literature. Nevertheless, some researchers like to utilise one or the other term depending on the desired intensity in the negative meaning they want to convey.

This poses some issues both in theoretical and in methodological terms. From a theoretical point of view the critical issue is to specify the elements characterising the concept; from a methodological point of view the question is to turn operational a complex concept with weak boundaries.

Different authors have dealt with the themes of lack of work stability adopting different points of view. Some researchers put the focus on the context in which this phenomenon takes place, through the definition of the relevant social environment that supports it (Beck 2000a 2000b, Castel 1995 2003, Sennet 1999, Bauman 2000). Other researchers, using labour-market studies as a starting point, have tried to identify which are the most important forces that operate and contribute to the growing lack of work stability (Reyneri 2002 2003, Gallie 2000, Paugam 2000).

Finally, other authors have tried to interpret the effects of a lack of work stability within other social paradigms such as poverty and social exclusion (Mingione 1999, Buck 1996, Negri e Saraceno 2000, Whelan e Layte 2001). Adopting a matrix approach to these contribution can help defining a framework for a semantic structure of the concept. One of the potential readings is to start from the valuation of the subjective dimension (taking the worker as a single individual) and cross it with an objective dimension (the context in which these transformations and changing are taking place). Adopting a spatial metaphor, the concepts of instability and precarious work can be analysed through a redefinition of the social boundaries of the phenomenon.

The ongoing socio-economic transformation, and more specifically the ones that affects labour markets, are modifying the boundaries defining the space of action of social actors.

Through this spatial representation it is also easier to understand Castel when he speaks about adult individuals that have grown up in a traditional work context where stability and security was guaranteed, and find themselves to grow old in a very unstable, precarious work environment. The loss of stability is not felt as a “normal” transition for them and for this reason that the “destabilisation of the stable ones” occurs. (Castel 1997).

At the other end of the spectrum there are young people that have been growing up within the transforming system, and have built their work-bearings in a world where the employment certainty guaranteed to their fathers does not exist anymore. This group has developed specific capabilities that make the absence of stability an almost “normal” condition. In this perspective the search of possible employment alternatives becomes a natural aspect of a standard career path. Young people experiment what Castel calls “settlement in instability” (Castel 1997).

In this scenario, freedom of choice has multiplied but on the other hand, constraints have increased contextually. The need of a job pushes employees to be eventually, less free of choosing, being tied to everyday needs. As the range of opportunities grows wider the opportunities of choosing effectively reduces. This apparent oxymoron accurately exemplifies the sense of employment uncertainty typical of this time. Often the existing constraints based on material needs, lead individuals to think of using their freedom of choice whilst, in reality they are just struggling to find an effective response to satisfy everyday-needs and in this process they are willing to sacrifice some of their employment rights to which they should be entitled.

In order to gather a better understanding of this condition, the concept of “functioning” can be introduced. Using a distinction introduced by Sen (Sen 1994), the diffusion of “atypical” work can be read as an improvement of people’s freedom since it helps individual abandoning unemployment traps and introduces the opportunity of experiences occupational changes within the same career. Nevertheless, “atypical” work can also be considered as a limitation for the worker’s freedom of pursuing its ambitions (that according to Sen can be classified as “*functioning*”). Without a guaranteed source of revenue, many career decisions become difficult, when not too risky to be taken. This is exemplified by young people that keep living with their parents because they do not possess a sufficient or stable income to buy nor rent a house, and by young couples that procrastinate marriage or child-birth to the moment when they will reach a certain degree of employment stability (Fullin 2000).

Following Sen’s thinking, differences in terms of “capabilities” characterising and utilised by single individuals, can be added to this picture in order to explain the differences and complexity of the “atypical”- work universe. This also helps explaining why individual with similar occupational situations can develop opposite career paths. This is reinforced by the idea of Sen of distinguishing between “titles” (rights) and “endowment” (different forms of capital that support the individual and allow him to activate his rights)<sup>ii</sup>:

So far it has mainly been highlighted the negative effects deriving from the lack of employment stability. Despite this, it is important to remind how instability can take different

connotations when, for some reason, the lack of stability becomes a choice that brings some advantages. This element suggests how the issue of the lack of stability linked to the concept of precarious work, leads to questioning the categories of analysis through which we observe the transformations of the labour markets. The main issue it then becomes how to revise and enlarge traditional categorisation in order to capture the ongoing changes. This for two reasons; firstly because of the new and peculiar condition of workers that live first-hand, the loss of employment stability, and for whom it is important to create new categories, to clarify the different characters of atypical work. Secondly, because of the important fall-outs that atypical work has on instability and on social life. Usually this topic is addressed relatively to unemployment, considered as a break of the linkage between the individual and the social aspects of work. With the introduction of new flexible forms of employment, the focus must turn to precarious work and the instability deriving from it, in order to understand what can happen in “border-line” situations, where job-loss is one possible output but not the only possible one.

### **3. The empirical translation**

While thus far we have proposed a few reflections on reference frameworks related to the lack of stability in the working environment, we cannot relegate the question of the empirical translation of this phenomenon to a secondary role. Through the reflections made thus far, it becomes clear how the existing categories are not always sufficient to explain the transformations taking place. If from the conceptual point of view there are difficulties in definition, these turn up again when we proceed to the operationalization of the concept. The risk is that of ending up in a maze in which the chances of getting lost are extremely high. If we then consider that the sources of available information are often incomplete and insufficient, we understand how complex the problem is, and how it is necessary to formulate new research programs that make possible an increasingly clear definition of the problem, both from a macro and a micro perspective.

For this reason, we need to try to find some reference points, or, returning to the space metaphor, to indicate some boundaries.

The condition determined by the lack of occupational stability, identified by conditions of precariousness and instability, can be considered a working condition on the boundary between unemployment and stable full-time employment. The notion of ‘boundary’ appropriately expresses the sense of the lack of stability associated with this occupational condition. But how to identify this condition? What indicators should be considered? How to discriminate between more or less serious situations? The question is once again very complex, and, while we do not presume to exhaust it here, we can begin to develop a few considerations.

Over the course of recent years, various research, have used different approaches to define certain elements that allow us to identify those workers who experience a possible lack of stability. The definitions adopted by different authors are affected by the various approaches employed, and therefore are not always homogenous with each other (Paugam 2000, Altieri,

Oteri 2002, Migliavacca 2008, Schizzerotto 2002, Kaiser 2001, Blossfeld H.P., Buchholz S., Bukodi E., Ebralidze E., Kurz K., Relikowski I., Schmelzer P.2005). We therefore must identify the critical dimensions through which it is possible to render the concept operational and settle the situations in doubt. The validity of a theorization depends on its ability to be transformed into empirically controllable hypotheses; the criterion of empirical controllability is the very criterion of a scientific approach.

A first aspect that must be considered regards the type of contract. In recent years, transformations of the labour market have introduced certain types of contracts, which because of their specific elements are characterized as being atypical. Consider fixed-term contracts, temporary work, or project or on-call jobs, recently introduced on the Italian scene. Although it is the most frequently used, this distinction is still not sufficient; we must go further.

Another aspect, closely tied to the first, regards the temporal dimension attributed to working experience. We have seen that one of the fundamental passages from typical to atypical is the breakdown of temporal continuity in the working relationship. The change in the duration of the working experience determines the formation of a new kind of professional career, no longer built on the security of a permanent position, but on the necessity/possibility of accumulating multiple experiences. The accumulation of multiple experiences can only lead to the achievement of minimal wage coverage, or to the attainment of a new stability built on the sum total of multiple experiences<sup>iii</sup>.

The third aspect concerns a professional dimension. The possibility of building a professional character with respect to the working experiences one has can identify substantial differences. The more employment is unstable and precarious, the more aspects unrelated to continuity and contractual conditions become significant, inasmuch as inherent on one side the quality and transferability of previous employment, and on the other the professionalism and expertise acquired. This aspect also encompasses the characteristics related to the sector of employment and its exposure on the market. Belonging to a strong sector with a high degree of competition determines exposure to precariousness and instability that is different than that for workers belonging to a marginal sector in which competition does not exist (Mingione Pugliese 2002).

A fourth aspect that can help distinguish the various levels of exposure to conditions of precariousness and instability regards the presence and possibility of building a network of contacts developed through professional relationships. The extent and quality of this network contribute to defining the level of protection and guarantee offered by these new forms of working careers. The weaker this network is, the greater will be the risk of being penalized by the lack of stability.

Another interesting aspect is tied to the wage dimensions of the occupations. Crossing salary data with the temporal dimension of the job can help us better understand the differences between stability and instability. The issue of the wage dimension is an undoubtedly delicate

aspect but one of vital importance, despite the fact that it is little discussed, in part because it presents real difficulties in terms of collecting data.<sup>iv</sup>

A sixth crucial factor, certainly not the least important, relates to the family condition. Various studies, using different approaches, have confirmed that the role of the family is fundamental both as a resource and as a constraint (Fullin 2004, Migliavacca 2002, Ranci 2002, Saraceno 1998, Schizzerotto 2002). There are many important aspects related to this factor: family composition, the family's income dimension, the family network, etc.

Further, we must not forget the possibility of access to targeted welfare resources. This aspect, which highlights the differential way in which rights are attached to the various contact types, could be a supporting element for people already exposed to unstable conditions. This aspect highlights the crucial importance of the territorial dimension. The geographical contextualisation is of fundamental importance given the existing differences in regulations and diffusion of flexible labour models even within European countries<sup>v</sup>.

The difference from one country to the next is vital, but so is the internal difference in each country

This brief survey of thematic areas does not pretend to be exhaustive, but rather indicative regarding the identification of elements that make it possible to identify and discriminate between different forms of occupational precariousness and instability.

As mentioned previously, one of the biggest problems is that these types of information are almost never found simultaneously in the commonly available databases. Generally, choices are made regarding the areas of focus, which can alternate between the working career, the working period, the family condition, etc. This is undoubtedly a powerful constraint, but beginning to broaden the horizon by using both the data already available and by preparing new data, through new and targeted studies, can help us better understand the evolution of the problem.

Simultaneously covering both the theoretical and empirical paths helps better define those elements that can assist in understanding the transformations underway, trying to avoid possible mistakes. As Merton reminds us, the relationship between theory and research is not a one-way street; on the contrary, the two are interdependent (Merton 1966). Working from this proposition, Merton then affirms that empirical research goes well beyond the confirmation and validation of hypotheses; it plays an active role with respect to theory. "Research plays an active role: it performs at least four basic functions that help shape the development of theory. It initiates, reformulates, deflects, and clarifies theory." (Merton, 1966: 254).

As we have seen, the lack of occupational stability assigns an even more powerful role to an individual's social surroundings, because it can determine possible exposure to conditions of greater or lesser weakness. A vulnerable individual in a strong social and occupational context (low rates of unemployment and elevated mobility) may suffer to a lesser degree the effects of the lack of stability than would another individual with meagre social resources in a marginal working sector. Continuing to provide an empirical interpretation of the

phenomenon, one possible route is to alter the focus of the analysis, shifting from the individual to the social unit nearest him, that is, his family.

In order of these topics we can to define the operazionalization of the concept of job instability. In order to make it we use the ECHP (European Community Household Panel) data set<sup>vi</sup>. Used the information about work condition, the type and the length of the contract and the temporal dimension of the job, we can define an index that identify the different position of the workers on the axis stability-instability. The instability index split the workers in three different groups: stable, unstable and unemployed. Inside the stable group we found all the workers with a permanent contract, inside the unstable group we can found all the non permanent workers and in the unemployed group we found all the unemployed. In order to the self employed we divided it in stable and unstable according to the workin time. The table 1 shows the distribution of the instability index in the different countries.

[Table 1 about here]

#### **4. The family dimension**

One of the basic questions regarding the spread of atypical forms of employment regards the consequences they have on the life of the individuals and their primary social contexts. A possible route is to look at the primary socioeconomic context in which the individual finds himself, that is, the family. The family influences and directs behaviours and individual choices, also with regard to employment. As Esping-Andersen stresses, the family is primary among social institutions; it is a decision-making player, and, in that it is an institution, it models the behaviour, expectations, and desires of the individuals. As a subject of decisions, the family is a player that participates in the daily life of the society (Esping-Andersen 2000). Looking at work through the family does not simply mean observing it as an "economic place" in which the monetary fruit of the work of the individuals converges in order to satisfy the family's consumption requirements, but it also means observing it as a place in which the different working and professional conditions intertwine. It means reading the possible presence of precariousness and instability in a form aggregated with the family's other working realities, and understanding the impact of vulnerability and instability on family systems.

The centrality of the family dimension also emerges with regard to the analytical and strategic importance that welfare systems take on in analyses of this type.

The family is thus the place where working-professional and working-familial needs meet and measure against each other. The concept of work family system, introduced by Pleck (Pleck 1977), put the evidence on the complexity of these topics. Plecks define the work family system like a complex interlacing between working dimensions and families organizations. The ample debate on dual presence, on healthcare work and more generally on the role of women in the workplace has broadly analyzed these themes (Balbo 1990, Bimbi 2003, Saraceno 1998, 2003, Allen, Barker 1976 ). It seems therefore clear that the family is a strategic place in which to analyze the effects of possible employment instability determined by the presence of atypical forms of work.

An operation of this kind makes it possible to understand which is the "injurious potential" linked to the experience of a lack of stability in employment, and consequently allows us to identify when conditions of precariousness and instability define strong profiles or weak ones.

For this reason it is necessary to keep in mind the double value tied to occupational precariousness and instability. If on the one hand there are workers, and consequently families, penalized by conditions of precariousness and instability, on the other there are individuals and families who are not penalized by this condition, or even, in certain cases, who manage to transform this state into an advantageous condition.

This aspect is central because it refers to the reflections developed earlier regarding the possibility for workers to manage their own professionalism in relation to the demands of the market. Considering atypical situations only in their negative connotations runs the risk of producing partial and confused analyses, particularly when we wish to interpret the impacts and effects of the presence of precariousness and instability.

Among the various elements that define precariousness and instability, there is the issue of it being a "transverse" phenomenon, in the sense that it affects different population groups. If in the model of the wage society unemployment largely concerned the lower classes, an element characterizing the modern forms of lack of stability is that it does not affect only those with low levels of education and few professional skills belonging chiefly to the most disadvantaged classes, but rather, it also concerns individuals belonging to the middle classes with higher levels of education. It does not strictly affect young people who, failing to find stable employment, are forced to collect different jobs, but also affects adults who have left the labour market and find themselves experiencing this condition in a labour market with characteristics different from those of the past.

Many researchers have highlighted these questions in different forms. However, it is necessary to translate these questions into empirical terms. It is necessary to use the family as a unit of analysis, providing for the construction of different types that make it possible to keep together the classical elements of labour market analysis with the elements belonging to the analysis of families.

Usually, the family is used as a variable intervening in both positive and negative ways (the family as protection, the family as constraint). Alternatively, it is used in terms of analysis regarding the comparison between family responsibilities and participation in the job market, especially in literature about women's participation in the job market.

Beginning with these basic contributions, we must attempt an analysis beginning precisely from the family, understood as social unit of united subjects, who with their different positions relate to the world of work. Through this perspective we have a chance to place all the actors in the family: those who play an active role (the workers, the labour force), those who previously played an active role (pensioners, retirees), and those who will play such a role in the future (young people not yet working). To these we then add people who do not

fall into these categories, but "use" the work of the other family components (those who by choice or condition will never relate with the labour market).

From the methodological point of view, we must use the family as the social object to which the properties we intend to study refer. We must use the family as a unit of analysis and survey. This already occurs, for example, in the case of the labour market with regard to surveys on the labour force, but we must go further. We must integrate detailed occupational information with information on the different aspects of the family systems in order to identify the family-work models that allow for a crossover interpretation of the phenomenon. The need to produce analyses that highlight the structural characteristics in a context growing increasingly complicated confronts the researcher with the necessity of identifying alternative routes for the study of different social phenomena. The problem, if indeed it is one, is thus once again conceptual in nature. We need to bring concepts that are generally handled with distinct strategies onto the same level of analysis.

The continuous passage from the theoretical dimension to the empirical one is an essential characteristic in defining new paradigms that make it possible to better interpret the transformations currently underway<sup>vii</sup>.

Using the job instability index we can compose the different work-family models. The figure 1 shows the different type of combinations.

[Figure 1 here]

The different work family models identify the first step to analyze the relation between family dimension and work dimension. The table n.2 shows the distributions of the seven different work-family models in Europe.

[Table 2 here]

After this first step we can analyze every single work-family models if we put the focus on the number of the different job positions. In this way we can study the difference between single and dual earner families (Blossfeld H.P., Drobnič S.2001, Villa 2004) .

Beyond identifying the family as a unit of analysis, we must identify a *frame* within which to interpret the structure of work-family models. We must identify an analytical model that takes into account the multidimensional complexity of the phenomenon. A possible response to this question could be given by the social vulnerability approach to the analysis.

## **5. The social vulnerability approach**

In recent years the theme of social vulnerability entered the social sciences' sphere of attention like a new concept to analyze the new forms of inequality (Ranci 1997, 2002, Negri 2002, 2004, Whelan, Maitre 2004, 2007).

Within the definition of social vulnerability, different points of view and different disciplinary approaches converge, connected by a theoretical background that recalls in particular the work of various authors including Beck (2000a), Bauman (2000), Castel (1995, 1997, 2004), and Giddens (1994), who developed important reflections concerning the subjects of risk, insecurity, and new forms of social disadvantage. Although it entails many difficulties due to the novelty of the approach and the need for further reflection, the concept

of social vulnerability is an ideal approach for understanding those social changes characterized by conditions of weakness and instability typical of current transformations, for which the classical categories of interpretation at times are no longer sufficient.

Reflection on social vulnerability has cognitive foundations both of an empirical and a theoretical nature. In recent years, social scientists have had to deal with a social reality undergoing rapid changes, that determined the appearance of new forms of social disadvantage characterised by an interlacing of situations involving multiple dimensions. The appearance of that which some people define as the new social question is characterized by its multidimensionality, for the understanding of which suitable analytical tools are often lacking. One of the basic problems is caused by the presence of an analytical dualism, which sees on one side a structural type of interpretation characterized by macro type of analyses, and on the other, an interpretation of the most extreme forms of disadvantage concentrated on the subjective character of the phenomenon and characterized by more qualitative analyses (Ranci 2002). The notion of social vulnerability constitutes an attempt at a transversal reading between different research traditions, with the aim of providing interpretive categories adequate for understanding the transformations underway. One of the focal points of this type of analysis is linked to the impact that social insecurity has on the living conditions of growing parts of the population. Attention is focused on the problem related to the stability-precariousness duality regarding placement in the principal systems of social integration: work, the family, and the welfare system (Ranci 2002). For this reason, use of the social vulnerability concept can be a good interpretive key for understanding those transformations in the world of labour that have caused an increase in jobs connoted by precariousness and instability. Use of the social vulnerability concept can also be extremely interesting because it sees in the family the nerve centre of structuring new forms of disadvantage, and it lends itself perfectly to a multidimensional interpretation, essential for understanding these phenomena, characteristic of the modern transformations of the world of labour, which involve and interweave different dimensions of social relations.

In order to understand the wealth of this approach in studying current transformations, and in particular in relation to the spread of forms of employment characterized by precariousness and instability, it is appropriate to view the elements that define the emergence of social vulnerability.

According to the Esping-Andersen interpretation, over the course of recent decades, the pillars that supported Western societies – work, family, and welfare – entered a period of crisis, placing in difficulty not only the weakest extremes of the population, but also those such as the middle classes situated in safe conditions. According to Castel, with the crisis of wage society, the condition was created that triggered a state of progressive erosion of intermediate positions (Castel 1997). With a cross interpretation of the considerations made, we can better exemplify the characteristics of the erosion.

An initial form of erosion involved the organization of labour. The crisis of wage society translates into the weakening of labour as the principal mechanism of social integration. The

lack of occupational stability and the lack of guarantees determine the consistency of this effect.

A second form of erosion refers to the family dimension and the loss of density in family networks and primary sociability. The change of family biographies has also introduced weak and little-protected family groups.

The third process of erosion regards the role of the social state. Welfare has remained trapped inside a model that does not connect with the profile of social risks that is dominant in our society (Ferrera 1998, Ranci 2002). Thus, new categories of social risk spread, and among them, that related to the lack of occupational stability assumes the primary role<sup>viii</sup>.

Additional in-depth information on these subjects must nonetheless be further developed and broadened. In light of this consideration, it appears nonetheless evident how the approach to social vulnerability can be a useful interpretive key for understanding the multimentional nature of the transformations currently underway. Given the difficulties in providing an empirical translation of the concept, we do not consider this hypothesis to be an alternative option, but rather a supplementary option as compared to the more classic studies on the labour market and inequalities.

Another important aspect regarding the use of social vulnerability as an analytical model is the use of the family as a unit of analysis. Shifting the focus of the analysis to the family substantiates the multidimensional character of the problems under discussion. As has emerged from recent analyses, the impact that the different injurious factors have on families is not always necessarily the same: some appear well-equipped to manage critical situations, and other less well-equipped; some perceive such situations as critical, while others don't see anything damaging in them at all<sup>ix</sup> (Ranci 2004).

Using the schema of the work-family models we can read (through the social vulnerability frame) the relation between family structure and the different work-family models. In this way we can analyze the different impact of the job condition on the family. Table 3 shows an example of this relation.

[Table 3 here]

Using the social vulnerability approach we can try to understand the different “shapes” of the relation between work family models and families structures. In order to make it we must to analyze the different areas of the social vulnerability concept (housing, care, poverty, for example).

The lack of data sources that include detailed information on working conditions and family conditions is certainly an objective limitation, but it is necessary to assume a critical attitude with regard to the problem and venture new trials, both in the integrated use of data that already exists and also in the preparation of new collections of data.

The continuous exchange between theoretical perspective and empirical translation becomes even more necessary at the point in which the existing categories are no longer sufficient to describe the reference universe. Recourse to the use of social vulnerability as an interpretative model may entail the rejection of the analysis of certain aspects, which prove to

be too complex to be handled in a multidimensional perspective. Consider for example the longitudinal analysis of occupational paths.

This approach in any case offers a great deal of potential regarding the possibilities of reading the interlacing and interconnections between the different factors in order to identify possible new forms of disadvantage. Further, we must not forget that in order to propose and draft appropriate policies that meet the needs of individuals, we must have suitable tools to understand the transformations taking place. If the transformations under way, as in the current case, involve different spheres of society with borders that are not always defined, we must pursue new paths in analysis – we must experiment with new theoretical and conceptual paths – with a healthy dose of prudence, thus having the courage to retrace our steps if the experiments do not work, but also risking whether these offer new interpretive possibilities helpful in understanding the complexity of the transformations.

## Tables and figure.

Table 1: Job stability for country. Year 2001 (%)

	stable permanent	stable self employed	unstable	unemployed	total
Denmark	76,1	6,3	12,7	4,8	<b>100,0</b>
The Netherlands	73,8	4,6	14,6	7,0	<b>100,0</b>
Belgium	69,1	11,0	10,8	9,1	<b>100,0</b>
France	70,5	6,4	12,8	10,2	<b>100,0</b>
Ireland	63,7	12,0	15,7	8,7	<b>100,0</b>
Italy	55,1	20,7	12,3	11,8	<b>100,0</b>
Greece	43,7	30,1	18,1	8,0	<b>100,0</b>
Spain	45,0	16,7	26,2	12,1	<b>100,0</b>
Portugal	55,9	19,7	18,3	6,1	<b>100,0</b>
Austria	73,0	11,7	10,6	4,7	<b>100,0</b>
Finland	68,0	10,2	13,2	8,6	<b>100,0</b>
Sweden	44,0	35,5	13,4	7,1	<b>100,0</b>
Germany	64,3	8,6	17,5	9,6	<b>100,0</b>
Luxembourg	81,5	6,1	9,8	2,5	<b>100,0</b>
UK	75,1	8,8	12,6	3,6	<b>100,0</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>61,6</b>	<b>15,2</b>	<b>15,3</b>	<b>8,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>

Source: our elaboration on ECHP data

Table 2: Work family system. Year 2001 (%)

	only stable	only unstable	only unemployed	stable + unstable	stable + unemployed	stable+ unstable+ unemployed	unstable + unemployed	Total
Denmark	73,3	7,8	3,1	11,2	3,4	0,9	0,4	<b>100,0</b>
The Netherlands	71,6	10,1	3,7	8,9	4,5	0,5	0,7	<b>100,0</b>
Belgium	71,0	5,3	7,7	10,0	4,9	0,7	0,5	<b>100,0</b>
France	67,7	4,8	5,6	12,3	7,1	1,2	1,3	<b>100,0</b>
Ireland	62,9	7,5	5,6	15,4	6,1	1,2	1,3	<b>100,0</b>
Italy	68,3	5,7	5,1	9,8	8,0	1,2	2,0	<b>100,0</b>
Greece	65,0	9,2	3,6	13,5	6,5	1,1	1,1	<b>100,0</b>
Spain	51,6	14,0	5,9	16,3	6,0	3,2	3,0	<b>100,0</b>
Portugal	60,3	6,9	2,1	21,2	6,3	1,6	1,5	<b>100,0</b>
Austria	77,6	4,3	3,1	10,5	3,5	0,6	0,4	<b>100,0</b>
Finland	70,6	7,6	6,3	9,8	3,8	0,9	1,1	<b>100,0</b>
Sweden	74,3	5,4	5,5	10,9	3,3	0,3	0,3	<b>100,0</b>
Germany	64,4	9,3	5,8	12,5	5,8	1,1	1,2	<b>100,0</b>
Luxembourg	83,3	2,8	1,2	10,3	1,3	1,0	0,2	<b>100,0</b>
UK	77,4	9,1	2,3	8,3	2,0	0,3	0,6	<b>100,0</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>68,2</b>	<b>7,6</b>	<b>4,5</b>	<b>12,3</b>	<b>5,1</b>	<b>1,1</b>	<b>1,2</b>	<b>100,0</b>

Source: our elaboration on ECHP data

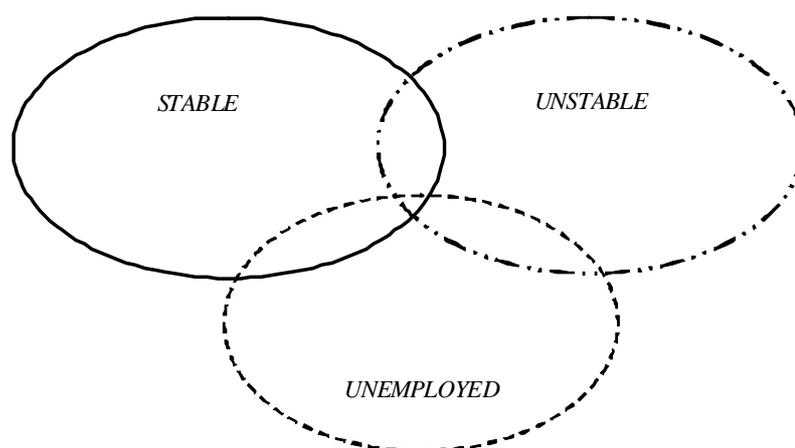
Table 3: Work-family models by families structures. EU Year 2001 (%).

	only stable	only unstable	only unemployed	stable + unstable	stable + unemployed	stable+ unstable+ unemployed	unstable + unemployed	Total
single	77,5	14,3	8,2	0,4*				100,0
Single parents children < 16	69,8	13,5	14,9	1,8*				100,0
Single parents children >16	62,1	10,6	8,4	10,3	5,3	1,3	1,9	100,0
Couple without children	72,5	7,8	4,0	10,8	3,9	0,1	0,9	100,0
Couple with children	66,3	4,6	2,4	16,6	7,0	1,6	1,5	100,0
Others	53,7	7,7	4,6	20,0	8,9	3,1	2,0	100,0
<b>Total</b>	<b>68,2</b>	<b>7,6</b>	<b>4,5</b>	<b>12,3</b>	<b>5,1</b>	<b>1,1</b>	<b>1,2</b>	<b>100,0</b>

Source: our elaboration on ECHP data

\* two jobs

Figure 1: Work-family models



## Notes

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<sup>i</sup>Mauro Migliavacca - Department of Sociology - Catholic University of Milan (Italy). email: mauro.migliavacca@polimi.it

<sup>ii</sup> A recent report by the EU recognised how atypical work can represent an important employment opportunity for some occupations (especially for low-skilled or scarce experienced workers. Nevertheless the same report admits that mobility is not often happening for many atypical workers. For almost half of them, stagnate in a indefinite instability year after year and more than 20% of them exit the job market, going back to unemployment EC, Employment in Europe 2001) (Altieri, Oteri 2002).

<sup>iii</sup> In this regard, it is helpful to recall how another important aspect to consider concerns the differences related to the working period – to the distinction between full and partial employment. This aspect is also important in terms of the part-time debate.

<sup>iv</sup> Information regarding income and salary data is always the most difficult to obtain. Often, those interviewed are unable to quantify the monetary equivalent of their wage or their salary, or, they prefer not to declare it. In all surveys, this type of information is that with the highest drop rate.

<sup>v</sup> THE OECD analyze some of these topic through the Employment protection legislation (EPL) index It refers to all types of employment protection measures, whether grounded primarily in legislation, court rulings, collectively bargained conditions of employment or customary practice.

<sup>vi</sup> The ECHP data contain not recent information (until 2001), but when we studied this themes it was the only data base could permitted a cross-section analysis about the relation between work conditions and family conditions in European countries. In the future, when the new data base EU-SILC will be available with some wave, we will be able to up to date the data. Otherwise one of the aims of this paper is to propose a theoretical and analytical frame to analyse the relation between family condition and job condition and define the operationalization of the concept of job instability.

<sup>vii</sup> As Merton reminds us, empirical research is not always subsequent to a theoretical formulation, and it is not necessarily the theory that guides toward new observations. The process is often inverted. Theory and research "must not only exchange solemn vows – they must know how to carry on from there. Their reciprocal roles must be clearly defined." (Merton, 1966 pg. 278).

<sup>viii</sup> In this regard, an initial attempt at an empirical translation of the phenomenon is found in: Migliavacca M. (2002), *The relationship with labour* in "The New Social Inequalities - Characteristics and Dimensions of The New Social Question in Italy," by C. Ranci, Il Mulino, Bologna. Using the survey on the Budgets of Italian Families prepared by the Bank of Italy, we can define a series of work-family typologies that cross the family occupational dimension with the biographic characteristics of the family itself.

<sup>ix</sup> The analysis in question refers to a study that developed in-depth qualitative information on a sample of Lombard families characterised by the presence of different injurious factors (lack or precariousness of work, lack of home, problems of illness, etc.). Over the course of the analysis, in particular an attempt was made to develop themes related to the production of mechanisms of vulnerability characterised by the weakening of family function and the corresponding processes of adaptation.

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