Socially embedded workers at the nexus of diverse work in Russia

An ethnography of blue-collar informalization

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore an important nexus of formal/informal economic activity in Russia: "normative" workers (in waged formal employment) by virtue of a strongly embedded work-related social identity and characterized by a significant number of weak social ties, move with little "effort" between formal and informal work.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper presents extensive ethnographic data from the Russian provinces on workers and diverse economic practices. It utilizes participant observation and semi-structured interviews from periods of fieldwork over the course of a year (2009-2010).

Findings – This study traces the theoretical debates on the informal economy from 1989 to 2008 and argues for a substantivist position on household reproduction that focuses on the interdependence of social networks, employment, class-identity and (informal) work. The findings demonstrate significant performative and spatial aspects of embedded worker identity, including the workspace itself as a contested domain, that facilitate movement between formal-informal work.

Originality/value – The originality of the paper resides in its ethnographic approach to informal economies under post-socialism and the substantivist evaluation of diverse economic practices in Russia as supported by formal work-based shared identities.

Keywords Russia, Blue collar workers, Ethnography, Informal economy, Post-socialism, Diverse economy, Precarity

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Across a number of disciplines from cultural studies to social anthropology, but particularly in social and economic geography, a new literature has emerged that attempts to read neoliberalizing processes within the particular socially and culturally differentiated contexts of communities outside the global north (Smith *et al.*, 2008). One particular strand of such research stresses the need to account for more nuanced and differentiated meanings and narratives of work, and the negotiation of work relationships under post-socialism (Crowley, 2001). The role of the informal economy in supporting household reproduction during transition has been in particular focus in recent work on Russian and Ukraine (Williams and Round, 2007a, b; Round *et al.*, 2008). In Ukraine research for a majority in formal employment, informal economic activity is also a significant source of income (Williams and Round, 2007a, p. 207) and moreover a deliberate choice rather than just a forced necessity (Williams and Round, 2007a, p. 212). The formal and informal were found to be:

> [. . .] deeply entwined in the location they take place in [and] concerned with far more than just the "economic" as they rely on historical antecedents, cultural knowledge, non-monetized reciprocity and the ability to negotiate power relationships as well as formal exchange (Round *et al.*, 2008, p. 183).

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Russian findings too challenged the "marginality" thesis – that represented informal economic activity as mainly affecting those without access to formal "normative" employment (Williams and Round, 2007b, p. 2323).

As well as the ubiquitous "envelope wages" – where part of the pay for formal work is hidden in unofficial payments, and the importance of off-the-books casual and occasional work, the research also highlighted informal permanent employment and own-account work (Williams and Round, 2007b, p. 2331). The significance of the last two categories is examined in depth in the present article.

In addition to work on the informal economy, a wide range of anthropological research has highlighted the importance of social networks, reciprocity, informal exchange and mutual aid as characteristic of household strategies in dealing with social and economic change since the end of the Soviet Union (Ledeneva, 1998; Caldwell, 2004; Dunn, 2004; Patico, 2008; Stenning *et al.*, 2010). Any reading of the impact of economic and social change on work and work relations in Russia and the former Soviet Union must simultaneously work through a number of conceptualisations of post-socialism that take account of the legacy of social flattening and the visibly shared experience of economic precarity post-91 that cut across classes and saw economics professors tend potato patches alongside peasants. Therefore, it is important to approach it, to theorize it, within a discourse of globalization without marginalising the particular historical, social and cultural specificities of that experience (Stenning and Horschelmann, 2008). In particular, research on work must take account of past narratives of labour that continue to influence contemporary lived experience of workers and the stories they tell about their identity. Research on the "non-west" must be careful not to construct a one-dimensional perspective of the east as merely passive in its reception to global processes and reshapings of space (Stenning and Horschelmann, 2008).

Thus, the present article takes its cue from research stressing the continuing socially embedded nature of workers and work after socialism (Dunn, 2004) and the reciprocal and communitarian values that post-socialist workers continue to articulate around employment and its alternatives. Linked to this are shared "mnemonic resources" of the socialist period (Straugh, 2009) accessible to individuals and households. To explain both continuity and change in attitudes towards employment, self-employment and other informal work – the articulation of these resources needs to be analysed. In turn, these communities share an unprecendently high level of "owner-occupier" housing status; this should not be seen as making them "housing rich" (Stenning *et al.*, 2010, p. 129), but nonetheless, must be taken into account in examining formal-informal work mobility. Both of these social "facts" must be borne in mind when evaluating the informant responses detailed here although a thorough analysis of their significance is largely beyond the scope of this paper. The main insight of this article is highlighting the important material social and economic legacies that support a diverse economy that is imbricated with the formal: the socially compressed nature of many communities – due to the concentration of enterprises during socialism – continues to facilitate horizontal social ties.

Like Hart's (1973) classic study of migrants' diverse economic tactics in urban areas in post-colonial Ghana, this article addresses choices facing the urban poor in a "transitionary" economic environment. Hart (1973, p. 77) highlighted the importance of informal social, and "particularistic" relationships and the desire of those engaging in informal work to retain links with formal employment as security. Like researchers working on industrialised economies and the diverse economies group, Hart's study

problematized the formal-informal dualism. In the Russian case, the examples presented here show that recourse to informal own-account work and employment provides opportunities of improving real incomes in the face of in-work poverty; in fact some essential services are increasingly the preserve of the informal sector, such as taxis, plumbing and car repair. Like the Ghanaian case, the overlapping and interpenetration relationship of registered and other work may provide a whole greater than its parts in terms of the potential for economic and human development, despite it arising out of a generalised precarity.

This article therefore seeks to examine the diversity of economic practices of blue-collar workers in an urban Russian setting outside the metropolises and regional centres where previous research on informal work has mainly been focussed. The empirical research underpinning it investigated the household strategies of "normative" workers, i.e. waged unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled employees, formally working in industry and manufacturing and "freely" selling their labour. Most if not all such workers engage in alternative economic activities to supplement their formal wage. This article attempts to answer the question of how the ubiquity of diverse economic activities squares with a formal work affiliation and, in many cases, socially embedded identity as a (blue-collar) "worker". Diverse (informal) economic practices in some cases are important ways of "hedging" against precarity in formal work (Morris, unpublished). However, the ethnographic materials of this research show how diverse economic activities, whether own-account work or informal employment, are correlated strongly to social identity and social networks formed through affiliation to formal work as "normative workers". "Normative" shared identities of workers and their social network forms are visible at the nexus of formal-informal work, support it and sustain it.

Debates on diverse economies

The diverse economies approach is most associated with the work of Gibson-Graham (2003, 2008) and The Community Economies Collective (2001) which seeks to highlight the myriad, seemingly marginal small-scale actions of households and individuals outside the formal economic framework of societies, activities that were previously given little attention in economic geography. A large part of this shift of focus to "'marginal' economic practices and forms of enterprise [that] are actually more prevalent, and account for more hours worked and/or more value produced, than the capitalist sector" (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 5). The informal market, self-employment, reciprocal labour, unpaid household activities, self-provisioning and gleaning, gift giving and barter (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 4) are all aspects of the diverse economies approach of relevance to the post-socialist context and the household strategies of informants. The diverse economies approach must be seen within a context of a long-standing critique of a theorisation of economic activities that seeks to separate out formal and informal economic activities: the "separate economies thesis" (Gershuny, 1983) – where increasing costs and wages in the formal economy lead to a variety of economic activities "detaching" themselves, becoming part of a thriving and separate informal sector – in industrial economies this can be often be observed in areas like childcare and other domestic-related services.

In contrast, others, including Castells and Portes (1989), argued that far from being set apart as a "set of survival activities" performed by the most marginal in society, the informal economy was systematically linked to the formal. Unregulated production

may well take place within the formal work context and is "not an individual condition [. . .] workers may switch between the two sectors even during the same workday" (Castells and Portes, 1989, p. 12). Similarly, the form of the management of labour may be the only aspect that defines a work process as informal – for example, licensed small businesses whose labour practices are opaque to tax and other authorities. The insight that informal economies may be parasitic or even symbiotic to formal production belied the separation and marginality theses that saw informal work as always precarious and unlikely to be engaged in other than through necessity by workers (Harding and Jenkins, 1989, p. 29).

The present research reinforces what I term the "imbrication" perspective on formal and informal affiliation and interpretation by workers themselves. Informants in informal employment or who undertake own-account work do not view their labour as detached, marginal or qualitatively particularly different. Workers negotiating constant movement between formal and informal labour status do often interpret aspects of control, surveillance and subordination in formal work as important imperatives in seeking alternatives – for example, the factory-based pipe fabricator who gains a majority of his income from weekend own-account plumbing work, but more importantly more social and personal satisfaction from such informal work (Morris, unpublished). However, at the same time, informants acknowledge their dependence on the formal economy for the very social networks and shared blue-collar identity (Pahl, 1980) that sustain informal work, as well as the material basis for alternative work, be it, gleaned, pilfered material (Ditton, 1977), ongoing access to spaces such as workshops where alternative work takes place after hours or whole alternative production processes occur with and without the connivance of managers and capital owners – the double-glazing case study presented here.

With its focus on informal employment and own-account work, this article seeks to not only highlight the importance of the formal-informal intermeshing of economies, especially from the perspective of the workers themselves, but also respond to the most telling criticisms of the diverse economies approach by Samers (2005). While the approach rightly highlights the significance of non-monetary exchange, household labour and mutual aid, it does not sufficiently address the "mundane" and "banal" realities of informal employment, which may be as exploitative as formal work, and in terms of commodity chains and other linkages, highly imbricated with the formal economy or unsustainable without it (Samers, 2005, p. 881). While mutual aid and domestic economies remain of crucial importance to post-socialist households (Ledeneva, 1998; Caldwell, 2004) the majority of significant informal economic activity, both in terms of monetary and social capital value to the individuals concerned, falls between the super-exploitative "sweatshop" conditions the diverse economies approach seeks alternatives too, and the cooperative and non-capitalist alternatives they highlight (Samers, 2005, p. 876). The research presented here therefore interrogates the meanings for those engaged in it of small-scale informal employment and self-employment, typical of provincial Russia. It explores the relationship between informal work and formal employment, how social networks in formal work facilitate movement in and out of formal employment. It seeks to orientate debates on diverse economies in post-socialism not so much away from unpaid informal economic activity such as household labour, self-provisioning and mutual aid, but towards appreciating more fully the pre-eminence of paid informal activity as imbricated with the formal economy, an important distinction highlighted by Williams and Windebank (1998, p. 1).

Ethnographic methods and informants

The research materials and data for this article were gathered in the Kaluga region of European Russia over three extended periods, totalling six months of ethnographic fieldwork, between November 2009 and December 2010. The main research tools were participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Through standard ethnographic practices such as snowballing from an initially small sample of contacts and gatekeepers, a large number of informants were identified (c0.50) who were currently engaged in informal economic activity, or who had done so in the recent past. Access to two small enterprises – one formally registered, the other not – was gained by the researcher and the materials here represent in-depth case studies of work and workers at these sites. At both sites, along with a number of other enterprises, formal interviews were also conducted with management in an effort to triangulate findings from the shop floor with the views of management: employers' identification of the major problem of staff turnover in Russia for SMEs is addressed in the conclusion.

The first enterprise is a specialist steel and plastic fabricating business that employs around 100 people. Research materials were gathered here from the senior management and from three key informants drawn from the shop floor, along with information gathered by more general participant observation and interactions with staff. The key informants were all engaged in significant own-account work related to their employment status and skills. The second enterprise assembles and installs PVC double-glazing units domestically. This enterprise is largely unregistered and "below the radar" of the tax and other authorities; it "employs" 15 people. Similarly, materials were gathered from those directing production and the shop floor. In this case, five key informants emerged, including the foreman and his shop-floor team. During the fieldwork, I lived within and participated in three different worker households drawn from these enterprises and so was able to draw on the experiences of these informants and their extended families and social networks on a daily basis throughout the research periods. In addition, I frequently visited informants' places of work, and in both cases was able to spend time on the shop-floor working alongside them and observing.

The social geography of the company town: economically diverse, socially compressed

The field site encompassed an administrative district (rayon) containing two small towns (populations 15,000 and 20,000) about 30 km from the region (oblast') capital, Kaluga. The region has relatively high FDI (evidenced by the opportunities for informants in the foreign-owned automotive industry), low unemployment and higher than average wages in comparison with much of the rest of European Russia. Significantly though, the relatively dynamic activities of entrepreneurs in this region does not appear to make ordinary people's propensity to resort to informal work any less likely.

During the Soviet period, both towns were dominated by single employers. The smaller town, which I call Izluchino[1], in focus here, was a "company town" – built from scratch in the postwar period around local extractive industries and manufacturing. "Company town" translates the term "town-formative enterprise"; in practice this was a single, extensive, industrial enterprise responsible for building the housing and other social infrastructure throughout the town and industrial zones. The enterprise provided the vast majority of the relatively well-paid blue-collar work in the town as well as work benefits such as canteens, transport and leisure facilities to the chiefly male workers

and their dependents[2]. The research presented here was part of a wider project on work and workers and the enterprises selected here are drawn from a variety of work sites encountered. Other examples illustrating the variety of enterprise include meat packaging and processing, welding of prefabricated structures for the construction industry, manufacture of specialist industrial filters, cement mixing and extractive processes, maintenance of construction vehicles.

Like most company towns, Izluchino exerted a strong pull effect on labour from neighbouring districts and regions, partly because employment guaranteed rapid access to company-provided housing (in the 1980s, some workers were allocated permanent housing in five-storey apartment blocks within six months of arrival). In the 1990s, these flats became the private property of the occupier, providing both a significant disincentive to labour mobility despite the economically parlous situation in the district, but also a sense of security, in that periods of unemployment were "survivable", as one informant put it.

The "company town district" has been identified as one of a small number of types of urban neighbourhood in the USSR (Lehmann and Ruble, 1997). The social character of such a locality was and remains overwhelmingly blue-collar to this day. Despite the splitting up in the mid-1990s of the main Izluchino Construction-Machine Plant enterprise – which built earth-moving equipment for the defence ministry – into much smaller privatised companies, resulting in the loss of over 50 per cent of Soviet-era blue-collar jobs, there are still a few significant (c0.1000 workers) factory- or shop-floor-based enterprises, as well as specialist shops which employ from 10 to 100 workers. The company town was a meant to be a relatively self-contained unit of production operating within an economy typified by shortages and sited, and according to such logic, close to the extractive industries that sustained it. It also necessarily created a sub-set of maintenance micro-operations (e.g. vehicle repair shops) designed to support core activities. This has been called a "do-it-yourself approach" (Winiecki, 1989, in Gentile and Sjöberg, 2006, p. 714) with many jobs in peripheral activities. The industrial zone contains a hinterland of inheritor businesses of the autarky type, now disaggregated from the main firm; including the first plastic-steel enterprise and the "parasitic" site of the informal PVC firm. The latter sublets in a disused shop of a much larger industrial business and requires multi-level ongoing negotiations regarding issues such as electricity and access with local managers to ensure its ongoing survival. The existence of this economically diverse hinterland, and the socially compressed public and geography of the town, is crucial to understanding the existence of ready-made social network resources for informants in their movement between formal and informal work.

Case study 1: normative workers in formal employment engaging in own-account informal work

This first case study shows that so-called "normative" workers (in waged standard employment with permanent contracts and benefits) by virtue of a strongly embedded social identity characterized by a significant number of weak social ties, move with little "effort" between formal and informal work. Indeed, their formal and informal work interpenetrates at a number of junctures. This problematizes both the usefulness of categorising workers as either normative or marginalized in the Russian context and also shows that work-related identity transcends formal/informal affiliation. In addition,

informal participation is strongly imbricated with access to social and economic resources contingent to formal work; formal employers implicitly and explicitly acknowledge and facilitate informal activities.

The daily on-the-job routine of Dmitry's (38-year-old) cutting and welding team at the firm "polyethylene" is specialized, i.e. single-lot "bespoke" fabrication of steel and plastic materials for construction, industry and the ministry the original Soviet enterprise once subordinated itself to. In other words, there is no routine. One week they could be making an elaborate sheath of steel scaffolding to enclose a power-station cooling tower, the next they could be welding sheet steel to make specialist biological filters or cutting enormous plastic piping for the gas industry. The key skill required is flexibility: personal and professional adaptability to the specific demands of the order; workers might have to undertake dirty and uncomfortable "shock" work to meet a deadline and put their home-life on hold, or they might have to use their tools and skills on a task or project they have no prior experience of.

Thus, although the work is not high-tech, all the shop-floor workers have good metal and plastic-working skills and are in high demand outside the enterprise in the burgeoning domestic heating system installation business in Russia. This is facilitated by the compact social character of the ex-company town. Many workers previously worked in the single Soviet enterprise and have a large number of weak "horizontal" (Dunn, 2004, pp. 118-29; Stenning *et al.*, 2010, pp. 105-6) social ties – whether through friends and relatives, neighbours, or, significantly through what I term "extended networks of practice" – in their blue-collar work most informants had tried out a number of jobs and built up a portfolio of contacts (and skills) in a variety of separate enterprises. For example, having worked for "the cement" or "the linoleum" (i.e. two sprawling works employing nearly 1,500 people between them) for perhaps only a few months endowed the worker with an enduring and common badge of mutual recognition among others who had done the same. This mutual interpellation did not necessarily entail trust, camaraderie or even reciprocity[3] but indicated an acknowledgement of blue-collar status and with it access to a further network of potential contacts both for the commissioning and soliciting of formal and informal work. Sayer (2005, p. 80) categorises some of this kind of interpellation a "lay sensitivity" to class. At the end of this ethnographic discussion, I shall make further use of his argument for a thoroughly classed Bourdieuian theorising of behavioural norms and allegiances as ethical dispositions. Seeing the functioning of social networks of blue-collar peers as part of a system of value may be helpful in avoiding an overly simplistic and romanticized view of agency and opportunity for the economically marginalized. Value here may be as much negative as positive. In recognising other blue-collar workers, shared identity may be expressed simply as a lack: "these others with whom I interact are not bosses/white-collar". The point is that this social identity is embedded in the socialisation through common work that informants experience in formal employment (most people have worked for "the cement" at some point and then moved on) and then is reinforced by the criss-crossing lines of interaction in the compressed social and economic space of working-class urban Russia; this is as true outside of work too: the market, the village plot and bath house, fishing on the river, drinking in the squares and garages – these are all spaces where interpellation works, mundanely, to make blue-collar lived experience normative, and the utilisation and networking of weak ties for informal work somehow natural.

When seeking a specialized person to undertake, for example, domestic plumbing work, the commissioner (more likely than not also a blue-collar worker) will make use of their extended social network and quickly arrive at a suitably "qualified" and vetted individual, in this case Dmitry, or one of his brigade at "polyethyl". Dmitry and others regularly spent weekends installing heating systems, mainly locally, but sometimes even for clients to whom he had been recommended by senior managers in the firm. The enterprise owner and workers alike understood this informal activity as part of a compensatory mechanism for the poor wages the firm paid. This moonlighting with which he and others regularly supplemented his take-home pay by up to 150 per cent was imbricated with formal work in other ways too. Parts of the informal work were often "prepped" at the formal worksite – the metal or plastic shop – with or without the knowledge of the foreman. Half-finished articles were stored on the premises, tools "borrowed", sometimes with permission. In this particular case, the commonly reported pilfering of both Soviet and post-socialist workplace was not observed, though gleaning of waste materials (scrap wood, steel off cuts) was widely practiced. Finally, just as allowances were made for "drinking Friday", "moonlighting Monday" was, for the best workers, the result of a tacit agreement with management that some "sick leave" could be taken on Mondays to finish own-account work in return for "storming" to deadlines at work to catch up. A complex and well-developed set of understandings existed between employer and some valued employees, who where naturally the same workers in demand outside the enterprise in plumbing and other odd-jobs.

Having an eye for maximising formal work resources without overstepping the mark for the purposes of domestic or informal use was in fact one of the performative markers between workers of evaluating peers as resourceful subjects suitable for inclusion within the extended social network of potential informal work contacts. "It's like you know who is good for a job outside by how they act on the job, what they do, whether they are sharp enough or not", said Dmitry. Another informant at the enterprise commented similarly "You see someone can work properly, can handle themselves, and you think, they can be part of the group". Dmitry, for example, had earned some significant "prestige" (avtoritet) among co-workers and outside the plant by using scrap steel to make high-quality shoe-horns and other articles during slack time at work, which he then gave away to friends and acquaintances and decorated his own flat with. As part of the gift economy and self-provisioning, this could be seen as functioning as a kind of blue-collar calling card: he was proud of these products and keen to stress interpretations of such production as witness to his all-round manual skills, much in demand in non-formal work. Thus, Dmitry was able to "naturalize" his already good social capital and receive more offers of informal work than he could cope with.

Case study 2: the values of informal employment and the role of worker networks in sustaining it

Most informants whether "normative workers" or not, made full use of opportunities for own-account and other informal work relating to skills or opportunities in formal work. In addition, one group of informants was engaged in informal employment on a semi-permanent basis. The second case study shows how informally employed informants saw their work as having significant benefits over formal work – it was well paid, its conditions and hours were flexible and working conditions, while physically demanding and uncomfortable, were characterized by a high level of engagement

and enthusiasm for the work. This was due, not so much to the monetary reward, but because workers felt they were largely peer- and self-managed, operating within a space of mutual recognition of worth.

The small double-glazing workshop was set up by a local entrepreneur who had previously worked for a legally registered firm as a manager and salesman. Using his social network, he recruited a single foreman (Sergei) who in turn recruited former co-workers and acquaintances to work on the shop floor. At any one time, up to ten people were, cutting and assembling aluminium frames and double glazing; some shop-floor workers also carried out delivery and installation. The enterprise had a legally registered sales outlet, but the organisation of the workshop and the employment and manufacturing was entirely clandestine. Individual orders for domestic installations were passed from sales to a workshop in a disused part of a Soviet-era factory. This was an unheated concrete shell, the foreman and manager personally negotiated the sublet and electricity connection and energy payments with the local management of the factory without the knowledge of the Moscow-based owners of the primary business.

Kolya (26), had come to this shop-floor work through his relationship to the foreman; they had previously worked together for "the linoleum". Prior to that he had worked in low-paid manual and auxiliary work. The initial attraction of informal employment was the high pay. He earned more than double the wage available from other semi-skilled factory-based work and triple his previous manual work. However, as the participant observation continued other, more significant factors regarding the advantages of the informal employment emerged which were supported by informant interpretations recorded. Despite the positive evaluation by informants of this work, it is worth stressing their frank admission of its precarious nature too. Frequent references to the possibility of the outfit closing up for a variety of reasons including the legal-administrative risks, poor working conditions, the seasonal variation in work, were expressed by informants.

Despite the difficulties associated with the clandestine shop-floor work, informants compared it positively to the formal work they all had significant experience of previously, even though some had worked in the past in highly paid automotive assembly with "European" standards of working conditions. One key benefit was the flexibility and negotiability of work thanks to the partly self-selected, social network-based work collective:

> Basically, as long as we meet the deadlines, we can come in as late as we like. So me and Sergei [the foreman] had some drinks and were up until 2 am. He left and said, "see you at 9", but then he phoned in the morning and we agreed to go in at 12 (Kolya).

Similarly, flexibility was possible in terms of roles in the work and "leave". Workers were observed switching roles frequently, with mutual agreement, which ensured variety in the work and, according to the workers contributed to productivity. Using social network connections, workers were also able to replace themselves at short notice if they needed to take time off. Both these aspects worked well, despite the fact that the work could not be described as purely manual and unskilled. Precision lathes and high-quality glazing required careful handling and some familiarity with relevant processes.

Little interpretation of the working space and informant responses is needed to conclude that shared worker status and recognition was key to the attraction of this

informal employment. Little interaction was required of workers with the initiating entrepreneur who delegated day-to-day running to the foreman and even gave him significant freedom of movement regarding remuneration. As in case study one, the importance of "weak" social ties was instrumental in the movement of workers to this informal employment and the sustainability of this work. In turn, the workers shared a common blue-collar identity that facilitated the functioning of the enterprise and enhanced the positive aspects of the workplace for informants. Similarly, too movement to informal employment was facilitated by workers being "embedded" in a social identity around blue-collar work: there was mutual recognition of social status and "competence" based on prior working relationships or "badges" of associated with initiation rites of manual-work recognition: working for stints at "the cement", etc. On the job, this "comfortableness" between co-workers made for a potentially sustainable and less exploitative workplace (as understood by informants) despite its precarious and clandestine nature.

However, positing a mutual "recognition" as key to enduring practices around work seems inadequate to account for and explain the embedded nature of social identity as workers and their ease of movement between formal and informal work. It is here that I wish to return to modifications made to social capital theories associated with Bourdieu. "Comfortableness" can be interpreted as part of a system of value for informants in relation to work, formal versus informal employment, and social status. Sayer and others (Keat, 2000) revisiting of Bourdieu sees classed ethical dispositions as key how actors "value others and their conduct in terms of their goodness or propriety" (Sayer, 2005, p. 42) and which produce unprompted action – such as utilising opportunities for engagement in informal work despite its precarity. Workers reflecting on the "good" of having some control of own work processes, acknowledgement of work and non-work needs, whether monetary or in terms of flexibility would shows that dispositions are not just about conditioned reactions to their own classed positioning but that:

> [. . .] people actively discriminate between the good and bad, safe and threatening, not just "classify" disinterested typologies [. . .] people are not merely shaped but flourish or suffer. In their mostly subconscious and fallible, but mostly practically-adequate ways, they *value* the world (Sayer, 2005, p. 34).

In this sense, some of the drivers behind informality and the "preference" by otherwise normative workers (or informal workers who might easily have remained in formal work) for formalized labour should be seen through the lens of the social as much as the economic. This is especially important in the post-socialist context where so much attention has been (rightly) put on wholesale precarity and survival of economic transition.

Conclusions

This paper has developed an empirically supported substantivist position on normative workers in informal work under post-socialism. The original substantivist versus formal opposition relates to Polanyi's (1957) broadening out of the "economic" as strategies of social reproduction that presuppose neither the logic of rational action nor conditions of material need. Neither carry adequate explanatory power for an ethnographically based method of inquiry. The research materials presented here have shown that the "needs" that account for some workers to undertake diverse economic

practices are embedded in a complex of social and cultural meanings. The geographical and social flattening of the world of the blue-collar worker under socialism can be seen to have ongoing legacies, even for current workers who grew up during transition to adulthood in an (albeit incompletely) marketized environment for industrial relations and work. Social acknowledgment by peers as workers qua workers is important for access to diverse economic practices and also helps explain the significant imbrications of formal employment with informal work. Social networks of "practicing" workers and their weak but persistent ties operating over a compressed urban social geography facilitate a diversity of household and individual tactics of which this paper has only been able to examine the two most significant to normative workers – own-account work and informal employment. To what extent can the indeterminate nature of formal-informal work and the accompanying social identity be seen as a "problem" that policy should seek to solve? In some respects, informal employment and own-account work can be shown to provide its own solution to the issue of poverty wages in skilled formal blue-collar jobs. Security of formal jobs is not the issue, pay and conditions are. As in the Ghana case in the 1970s, in the face of a "nexus of high living costs and low wages" the Russian urban poor seek diverse means of increasing their incomes (Hart, 1973, p. 68) and managing risk. The Russian-language management literature continually identifies employee turnover (commonly referred to as "churn") as a perennial problem for all enterprises. This is a result of not only poor wages but poor status and conditions, as borne out by the high level of satisfaction in informal work contexts. The findings of this article support research (Juurikkala and Lazareva, 2006) that indicates that attention to the importance of non-wage benefits is needed if policy makers and employers wish improve retention in the formal sphere. This would necessarily include addressing the more intangible social and cultural issues of blue-collar workers as the biggest "losers" of economic transition.

Notes

1. To protect the anonymity of my informants, I use a pseudonym for the town. I have also changed individuals' names and obscured some details pertaining to the nature of enterprises.
2. Inevitably, the term blue-collar is a simplification of the variety of manual, semi-skilled and skilled heavy and medium industry jobs available in the Izluchino enterprise. Significantly, many jobs that may appear to lack prestige or "skill" to a professionally qualified outsider are considered high status or skilled among workers – fork-lift driving, for example.
3. In fact, non-monetary exchange was rarely observed in informal economic transactions (Samers, 2005, pp. 879-80).

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