Third Year Sociology Special Topic Research Project

A Sociological Exploration of the Experiences of

Temporary Agency Workers

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ABSTRACT

The changing nature of employment is evolving at supersonic speed, spurred on by economic and social globalisation processes; new flexible employment strategies are changing the experiences of work for many. The aim of this research is to explore the subjective experience of workers who are affected by these new flexible employment strategies by focusing on Temporary Work Agencies (TWA) and the role they play in the contemporary employment market. Using a qualitative approach to understanding this phenomenon semi structured interviews were used to gain an insight into not only the lived experience of temporary agency workers, but the client companies and temporary agencies with which they interact through. This research offers a contribution to the already existing substantial knowledge base on temporary agency work. Given the previous international research that exists on this topic this piece adds an important dimension as there is a lack of research in the Irish context. The data collected unveiled themes such as the occurrence of stigmatizing treatment in the temporary workplace and instances of sexual harassment were analysed. Forms of alienation in the temporary workplace are discussed and examined. Delving into the policy and legislation background that is in place for Irish temporary agency workers this research uncovers the precarious positions this cohort of workers hold. Some concluding points are then offered.

Introduction

"Time honoured notions of fairness are cast aside for millions of workers."

(Boyce et al: 2007: 5)

The evolving nature of work and employment has been a preoccupation of many sociologists and well documented by various disciplines throughout history. Explorations into the ways in which people experience, access, and maintain work are commonplace in sociology. Indeed one of the founding fathers of sociology explored the process of capitalist accumulation and reproduction with intense enthusiasm. Karl Marx infamous theory focused on how the division of labour, the specialisation and repetition of tasks through the factory system has lead to the exploitation of the working class. Other sociologists have identified processes such as 'Fordism', where "power and control in diverse workplaces were centralised, hierarchical and identifiable," (Smith 1998:412) and its latest mutation dubbed 'Post Fordism', consisting of "flexibly specialised approaches" (Smith 1998:413) where power is dispersed throughout work structures. Processes of sociological interest include industrial conflicts, the rise of trade unionism; the subsequent decline of trade unionism, the movement of women into the workplace, new work technologies, increased competition by the globalisation of work and with it the 'flexibilisation' of production and employment. There is no doubt the contemporary workplace has changed dramatically and this piece of research attempts to understand just one aspect of these changes, that is, the flexibilisation of

employment and in particular the recent phenomenon of temporary work and temporary work agencies (TWA's).

This research projects begins with a comprehensive literature review of the research field with an introduction to the topic of Temporary Work Agencies. Employment strategies that have led to the need for temporary work agencies are then discussed from demand and supply perspectives. A review of how job quality is assessed in temporary agency work followed by an analysis of the literature around social relations between core and periphery workers is then discussed. Themes taken from the literature around the experiences of temporary agency workers are delved into such as stigmatizing treatment, sexual harassment and alienation. Issues around wellbeing and opportunities for resistance are highlighted and a discussion of the literature surrounding unionisation and the legal and policy background is then offered. This piece of research then puts forward an in depth methodology section that will guide the reader in how the research was carried out. This is then followed by a findings and analysis chapter whereby the data collected from semi structured interviews are discussed in detail. This research then offers some concluding points.

Literature Review

Temporary Work Agencies

Traditionally the standard employment relationship has been typically characterised by full time hours, permanent status with benefits including health insurance, pension plans and holiday pay. The contemporary process of 'flexible employment' has lead to the emergence of non standard employment relationships also known as 'atypical', 'contingent', part time, and temporary employment usually defined by temporary, casual, fixed-term or zero hour contracts. Increase in demand for temporary work arrangements saw the emergence of temporary work agencies, formerly known as temporary help services, and currently referred to as they attempt to rebrand; recruitment consultant agencies. Temporary Work Agencies (TWAs) refer to the triangular relationship between a temporary work agency, a client company and a temporary agency worker (Purcell et al 2004; Gallagher and Sverke 2005; Mitlacher 2008; Galais and Moser 2009). "The role that TWAs play is both complex and dynamic." (Purcell et al 2004) A TWA works for both the client company and the temporary worker, by supplying an external work force to the client company and by facilitating temporary work assignments to the workers. The TWA acts as the temporary workers employer, however the work itself is carried out at the client company's premises.

Demand and Supply

Various perspectives are interested in temporary work arrangements ranging from sociology, industrial relations, management and human resources. Research from these backgrounds

tends to focus on the demand side factors that lead to temporary work arrangements by focusing on the effectiveness of 'flexibilisation' business strategies to the organisations involved. Demand side theories include how employers are frequently looking for ways to increase competitiveness in their response to cyclical fluctuations in demand which often means the expansion and contraction of their work force to meet these demands however "inherent in this goal is the strategic objective of reducing labour costs by making labour more of a 'variable' rather than a 'fixed' cost," (Gallagher and Sverke 2005:182) whereby the worker is "conceptualized as a work input and is managed in much the same way as inventory or machines" (Rogers 2001:230). As well as these "corporate requirements for labour cost reductions" other motives include "head count manipulations and reasons of local operational flexibility" (Purcell et al 2004:710). Embedded within these strategies is the idea that the employers are shifting the risk of "operating in an unpredictable context onto the agencies, and more fundamentally, the workers themselves" (Purcell et al 2004:713). Employers not only use temporary work agencies as a means of accessing an external labour force but also as a way of outsourcing the work usually carried out by human resources as this reduces "managerial involvement in the task and time associated with hiring, training and evaluation of employees" (Gallagher and Sverke 2005:182).

On the supply side, or employee's side, there are a variety of reasons as to why a person would choose to take up temporary work through a temporary work agency. In recent times there has been an emergence of "professional, scientific and knowledge workers, privileged, well compensated, and autonomous," who through the use of a temporary work agency can still determine "their own work efforts and enjoy significant benefits and status." (Smith 1998:412) These professionals who use temporary work agencies are often "financially more lucrative than remaining as a salaried employee" (Gallagher and Sverke 2005:183). Highly

skilled workers also fill a demand on the employer's side as occasionally employers need to gain "immediate and specific access to specialized skills and knowledge that may not either be available within an organization or needed on a long term basis" (Gallagher and Sverke 2005:182). Aside from these highly skilled workers, there are the lower skilled "workers with less training or marketable skills," (Gallagher and Sverke 2005:182) who tend to seek work with temporary work agencies as an alternative to unemployment.

The Job

There are two types of job that are appropriate for externalisation; the first is what is described as 'routine peripheral' jobs that involve low skilled workers who are employed to perform "stand alone operations designed to be learned quickly" (2004:708) that are low in importance to the overall scheme of things and are easily supervised. The second type of job that is appropriate for externalisation is 'outside expert jobs'. These jobs involve a "high level of craft or professional skill" and require "little interdependence with other employees." (2004:708) Both types of job do not need access to the client companies social capital as they require little firm specific knowledge in order to be effective therefore making them appropriate for externalisation. This dual experience of the temporary worker has been described as the "divide in the post-industrial occupational structure between poorly paid and degraded service workers and the better positioned knowledge and manufacturing workers they serve" (Smith 1998:422). Although highly skilled workers enjoy the financial aspect of these 'expert jobs' "status differences are inherent in temporary work" as evidenced by the "lack of pension and other benefits, and ephemeral nature of the temporary workers' employment relationship even in nominally higher status occupations." (Boyce et al 2007:8) As "job quality is an important dimension of stratification in industrial societies," (Mitlacher

2008:446) it is important to note the research carried out in this area. Assessing job quality can include looking at future job prospects, access to training and development courses, health and safety issues and integration and social relations amongst agency and core workers. A study carried out on German agency workers found that "many agency workers lack access to internal training leading to reduced mobility options and to lower job quality of agency jobs," and that client organisations often "rely upon poorly trained temporary agency workers to perform high-risk assignments" (Mitlacher 2008:450) where the worker's physical health can be affected by being put into highly dangerous jobs with inadequate training or their mental health is at risk whereby the worker can experience excessive demands putting pressure on their emotional health.

Social Relations

Integration of agency workers and permanent core employees' is quiet tricky as social relations between them can be "problematic as many are treated as outsiders leading to a lack of recognition and appreciation." (Mitlacher 2008:449) This point is reflected in an American study carried out in the clerical sector where "temporary workers are generally considered to hold the lowest rank in the office, as they are given work and orders by supervisors and co-workers alike." (Rogers and Henson 1997:217) One study suggests the reasoning behind this treatment of temporary workers is that "for permanent workers, temporary workers may represent a threat to job security, indicating the organization can easily get someone else to do the same job." (Boyce et al 2007:8) It is important to note how the reasons behind why the client organisation has chosen to hire temporary workers can increase or decrease this perceived threat, for example if temporary workers are used as a way of reducing costs, this is perceived as a threat to the permanent workers, as they feel their job might be terminated due

to cost reduction strategies. Also, if temporary workers are hired for their expertise or specialist knowledge this is perceived as a threat too, however if temporary workers are hired on a trial basis before being made permanent this is not threatening to the core staff. (Boyce et al 2007:11) Temporary workers are often already "highly visible or publicly known" in one's "immediate workgroup" due to co-workers and supervisors being "aware that an individual is a temporary employee." (Boyce et al 2007:11) However some client organisations policies and procedures in relation to temporary workers can increase the likelihood of poor social relations between temporary workers and permanent workers. In an ethnographic study carried out in an American computer manufacturing firm "temps had to wear differently coloured badges, there was an 18 month cap on the length of their employment and they were excluded from various work-related meetings and social events for permanent workers." (Smith 1998:417) These badges or "status reinforcers" (Boyce et al 2007:11) serve to visualise the difference of work status amongst the workers and leads to "the treatment of temporary employees in a stigmatizing manner" as where the work status of individuals is "more visible than in settings where the status is less visible" (Boyce et al 2007:12) the chances of experiencing stigma is greater. A qualitative study based in the U.K noted how temporary agency workers were "expected to perform adequately from the first day and were placed in established teams alongside permanent staff" which led to "the social interdependencies of teamwork" being disrupted by the presence of these "inadequately trained temporary workers." (Purcell et al 2004:715) Problematic social relations amongst temporary and core workers' can lead to a situation where temporary agency workers are at an increased risk of experiencing stigma, sexual harassment, marginalisation and alienation in comparison to their permanent core co-workers. The reasons for this are multifarious. Some research suggests that stereotypic conceptions of temporary workers revolve around "low

skills, a lack of intelligence and general inferiority." (Boyce et al 2007:7) This negative stereotype tends to blame temporary workers for their employment status and that the "transience and marginalisation" nature of temporary employment is explained by "individual-level variables such as weak work ethic, laziness, lack of commitment, deviance, and even criminal behaviour." (Smith 1998:425)

Stigma and sexual harassment

Stereotypic conceptions of temporary workers lead to stigmatizing to occur; "stigmatization involves being treated in a devalued manner because of the possession of some key attribute – in this case, because one is a temporary worker." (Boyce et al 2007:8) Rogers and Henson's study on temporary agency workers in the American clerical industry explains the increased chance of sexual harassment when employed on a temporary basis, by stating how "temporary workers are objectified and stripped of their personhood, paving the way for poor treatment, including sexual harassment." (1997:217) Temporary work is highly feminised and there is an "expectation that temporary workers will be women," (1997:220) this can be extremely difficult for men who are temporary as they "fail to live up to normative conceptions of masculinity by not having a "real job," in "addition their drive, motivation, and competence for (male) career success may be questioned – that is, these are dead-end jobs that no 'self-respecting' man would accept. Ironically, the dead-end nature of these jobs is rarely seen as problematic for women." (1997: 223) Experiencing stigma or sexual harassment in the workplace can have devastating consequences for the individual and can ultimately lead to withdrawal from a work assignment, which financially can lead to ever further negative consequences.

Alienation

According to Rogers "alienation signals a lack of control, a certain powerlessness felt by the individual and derived from the structure of social relations," such as lacking the ability to control one's work, or to preserve solid and satisfactory work relationships, and to create a "self definition rather than have it imposed" (2001:232). Rogers study connects the individual, subjective, psychological experience of alienation to the larger organisational, structural factors related to capital production. The concept of alienation is a useful "heuristic device" for understanding the experience of temporary workers who are "structurally constrained from forming satisfactory relationships with others" (Rogers 2001:236). Rogers follows three Marxist categories; alienation from work, alienation from others, and alienation from self, (2001:233) this approach is further discussed in the findings and analysis chapter.

Effects on Wellbeing

So far the research has shown how "the majority of temporary workers receive lower pay, less training, and experience high job-insecurity," (Galais and Moser 2009:590) it also suggests that temporary workers face an increased risk of experiencing sexual harassment, stigmatisation and alienation. These experiences lead to lower job satisfaction, lack of organisational commitment and increased negative moods. These feelings in turn lead to disengagement and withdrawal from the job. On top of this due to the transitory nature of the work, when temporary workers experience reassignment they are also at risk as "transitions in general are stressful and detrimental to workers health" (Galais and Moser 2009:594). The negative emotions associated with all these experiences "use up resources needed for job performance and/or lead to responses incompatible with job demands" (Boyce et al 2007:19). As temporary workers are working within the client organisation they can become quite familiar with their surroundings depending on the length of their assignment, many

temporary workers experience a commitment to the organisation as a result. This commitment can bring about a negative experience for the temporary worker as Galais and Moser's research uncovered how "high organisational commitment to the client organisation turned out to increase workers' vulnerability for the negative effects of reassignment" (2009:609).

Resistance

Structural influences can also affect temporary workers opportunities for resistance. If a temporary worker were to experience unfair treatment or inadequate working conditions while on an assignment at the client company and seek to lodge a formal complaint in relation to this, the complaint would have to be lodged with the agency and not the client organisation where they are carrying out the work. As temporary workers are dependent on the agencies for further work assignments they could potentially feel that it's not worth making the complaint for fear of losing out on future assignments as "temporary workers often find themselves in dependent and vulnerable relationships with their temporary agencies and client supervisors" (Rogers and Henson 1997:228). These fears are not unfounded as research has shown how some temporary work agencies "exploit temporary workers' current and future labour market vulnerability, gaining compliance and discipline by tacitly threatening to deny them assignments or give them undesirable assignments and generally maintaining their disadvantaged, vulnerable status" (Smith 1998:415). This leaves the temporary worker at the mercy of the agency and the client organisation as no matter how bad the situation is the temporary worker has little choice in what he or she can do as "any work is often better than no work at all" and exacerbating the issue is how "financial constraints" are felt "keenly" and temporary workers make decisions regarding their

"reactions to harassment in light of those constraints" (Rogers and Henson 1997:229). Within the flexible temporary work industry the employment contract is now used as a "mechanism that controls and organises work effort," (Smith 1998:413) and when faced with unfair working conditions, individuals are much more likely "to engage in avoidance-denial or social coping types of responses than confrontation or advocacy seeking" (Boyce et al 2007:19). This constrained and restricted scenario coupled with the "pressure for a mistake-free performance" acts as a "powerful tool of control over temporary workers" and serves "to cement their acceptance of marginalised labour market status" (Smith 1998:424).

Unionisation

There is little protection for temporary workers across the globe. Unions are adapting their approach to include temporary workers and attempting to organise these workers, however the level of success they receive is dependent on "the attitudes that union leaders hold towards contingent work arrangements; the structure of union representational arrangements under national labour laws; and the form of the contingent work relationship" (Gallagher and Sverke 2005:195). The issue that persists here is the blurring of employer responsibilities for the temporary agency worker. In most countries temporary work agencies are defined as the employer, and take the responsibility of compensation for work, however "many of the terms and conditions of employment – which are increasingly the foundation for union organizing (e.g. respect, supervision, safety, etc.) – are more likely to be under the control of the client organization, rather than the temporary firm" (Gallagher and Sverke 2005:196). Other complications arise for the unionization of temporary workers due to 'targeting' issues as temporary workers "readily move from client to client and are also able to 'register' or be employed through more than one temporary firm," (Gallagher and Sverke 2005:196) this is

known as "the unionization-contingent work paradigm" (Gallagher and Sverke 2005:197). Within the Irish context the Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) have developed a campaign for better treatment for workers including temporary agency workers to "secure the right to equal treatment for all employees - full-time or part-time, permanent or temporary, direct or agency," they hope to ensure that "where agency workers are employed, they are covered by a collective agreement" and that all agency workers "enjoy the protection of an effective trade union" and that in particular migrant workers are not "ghettoised or alienated from the general workforce, from trade unions or from civic society in general" (SIPTU:2014).

Legal and Policy Approaches

SIPTU's demands are set against the history of a complex legal and policy background in Ireland and across Europe. As the industry rapidly evolves Governmental regulation on the issue is attempting to play catch up. The lack of regulation in the area plays "a major role in contributing to the level and growth of contingent and other forms of 'non-traditional' employment contracts" (Gallagher and Sverke 2005:183). The European Temporary Agency Work Directive was "finally approved by the European Parliament in October 2008 after nearly three decades of debate and failed attempts at regulation" (Countouris and Horton 2009:329). In Europe in 2001 a "social dialogue committee" had been created to discuss the phenomenon of temporary agency work however talks broke down not long after its establishment due to the "primary sticking point in discussions" being "the issue of comparability and equality of terms and conditions of employment, particularly pay, between agency workers and direct employees in the client firm" (Arrowsmith 2006:1). In 2002 a draft directive was issued by the European Commission and within it the principle of non-

discrimination between temporary agency workers and comparable workers was endorsed. Over the years the directive has evolved and in 2008 it finally came to fruition, and was enacted in 2011 however many of the "key provisions initially contained in the proposal" were continually "reprocessed and watered down" followed by years of "political stalemate" (Countouris & Horton 2009:329). The principle of equal treatment is one of the key promises of the directive and seeks to ensure that temporary agency workers are entitled to the same basic working and employment conditions as core/permanent workers at the client company and for the duration of their assignment while at the client company. Basic working conditions are defined in the directive as being "conditions relating to working time (including holidays) and pay" (Countouris & Horton 2009:332). However article 5(4) allows members to deviate from the principle of equal treatment so long as established parties and social partners agree, and that there is still an 'adequate level of protection' provided. For example in the UK this deviation included a twelve week qualifying period before "agency workers would qualify for equal treatment," which meant that this time period would disqualify "55% of British agency workers that have contracts of less than 12 weeks" (Countouris & Horton 2009:332) from equal treatment. The irony of the situation being that a directive initiated to protect temporary agency workers was at the same rendering them ineligible for protection.

Ireland's situation is even more ambiguous as whilst there is no discussion on qualifying time periods there is however much debate around the definition of pay, and who is liable to determine the comparable level of pay. This falls on the confusion over who the employer is, which according to Irish legislation depends on "which rights the agency worker is seeking to enforce"(Citizens Information 2014) as unfair dismissals and health and safety requirements are deemed the responsibility of the client organisation however "for the purposes of all other

employment legislation," including the Protection of Employees (Temporary Agency Work) Act 2012, the "party liable to pay the wages of the employee (the employment agency or client company) will, normally, be considered to be the employer of the agency worker" (Citizens Information 2014). In sum, the responsibility of ensuring that temporary agency workers are to be treated equally with regard to pay lies with the organisation that pays the wages directly to the worker. The situation as it stands is that the majority of temporary agency workers wages are paid to them directly by the temporary work agencies. This had led to the National Recruitment Federation, who represents the majority of TWA's in Ireland to call for further clarification. They have stated how "pay is complex, if it includes many fringes or associated benefits, annual bonuses, free parking etc, then the calculation of pay for short term assignments is impossible" (NRF 2014). The NRF are also unclear as to who this responsibility lies with as they ask:

> *If the worker isn't paid correctly, who is at fault? The Agency who pays them or the Employer who tells the Agency worker what to pay? Both have a key role therefore joint liability is the only fair recourse (NRF 2014.*

Conclusion

Temporary agency work is best described as a double edged sword, on the one hand the temporary agency worker is at the mercy of the larger structural forces at play such as the client companies managerial strategies responding to the rise and fall in demand, or the temporary work agencies constrained relationship with the client company; on the other hand experiencing embedded structural factors within the workplace such as sexual harassment, stigma and alienation. This dire situation is compounded with the lack of legislation to protect this cohort of the labour force that is caught between a rock and a hard place within a

"chameleon industry" (Purcell et al 2004:723). There has been a substantial amount of research in the area of temporary agency work, although very little in the Irish context. The following piece of research is an attempt to understand the lived experience of the Irish temporary agency worker.

Methodology

Introduction

Overall this research was guided by a post-positivist inductive approach. In this study I have used a mixed methods approach using a combination of qualitative methods consisting of semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. As my research involved an exploration of subjective experiences I chose qualitative research methods as they are good for "delving into social complexities in order to truly explore and understand the interactions, processes, lived experiences, and belief systems that are part of individuals, institutions, cultural groups, and even the everyday" (O' Leary 2012:113 - 114).

Sampling method

In relation to the semi structured interviews my sampling method was a combination of snowball sampling and purposive. Purposive sampling is a "non-probability sampling method in which elements are selected for a purpose, usually because of their unique position" (Schutt 2009:173). I knew of an old work colleague of mine who was now working in a

temporary work agency. I approached her asked her would she be interested in taking part in my research project as a representative for the temporary work agency. She agreed and became my key informant as she had relevant 'insider' information and knowledge of how temporary work agencies operated and was willing to share this with me (O' Leary 2012:171) She also facilitated access to the field of enquiry and as a result I was able to enlist further participants for my research project. This included three more potential participants who were currently employed at the agency undertaking various work assignments. I gave each of these participants a brief outline of my research project and my contact details and left it up to them to contact me if they were willing to take part. Two of the three temporary agency workers responded and were willing to take part. My key informant also approached some of her colleagues that were in management roles within the temporary work agency and asked if they would like to take part. Unfortunately they declined but they also assured my key informant that they had no problem with her taking part or for her to approach any of the employees at the agency. I approached a different temporary work agency as I was hesitant about using participants that were all from the same agency and whilst no representatives of the agency were interested in taking part in my research project I did manage to enlist two more temporary agency workers to take part in my research. In sum I enlisted four temporary agency workers, from two different agencies, two of whom are employed as temporaries in low skilled work and two who are employed in high skilled work, and a representative from a temporary work agency. I recognise that this piece of research is limited in terms of its generalizability as it is concerned with non-probability sampling that "often focuses on populations that are hard to locate or very limited in size" (Schutt 2009:117) and as a result is not representative of the whole population, however as my research is grounded in an interpretivist post-positivist philosophy my focus here is on the subjective experience of

temporary agency work. My sampling method for the documentary analysis was to use indirect data gathered from sources such as various governmental and academic literatures regarding temporary agency work obtained from government department websites, online sociological journals and books from Maynooth University library. These documents were analysed and used as reference points to connect to the findings from the interviews. I chose these specific documents because they describe the situation surrounding temporary agency work.

Semi Structured Interviews

I used semi-structured interviews in the hopes that this would allow participants to "express their personal experience of the problems" (Bell 2010:20) or indeed positive experiences they encountered through temporary agency work. I devised a set of questions to ask the 'insider' key informant, and devised another set of questions to ask the four other participants. I asked the same questions to the four temporary agency workers' so I could compare and contrast their experiences across a variety of themes found in the literature surrounding the research topic. The semi structured interviews were flexible and initially included some well defined questions to collect demographic data and then followed with more open ended style questions that allowed for the natural flow of conversation to take place but also to let interesting off topic tangents to occur. With all five participants I arranged the details with regard to the time, date and venue of the interviews and was eager to emphasise that they take place at their convenience. Each interview lasted roughly 30 – 45 minutes long and was recorded, and I transcribed each interview once they were carried out. The interviews took place in an informal setting and the participants seemed to be at ease throughout the

interviews and were happy to discuss their experiences. Throughout the interviewing process I made sure each interviewee felt comfortable and I treated them with respect. Having had some experience of temporary work arrangements myself in the past, I addressed any preconceived notions I may have had before the interview and tried to remain unbiased in my interviewing.

Analysis of Data

Qualitative data analysis "creates new understandings by exploring and interpreting complex data from sources such as interviews, group discussions, observation, journals, and archival documents" (O' Leary 2012:256). I began my data analysis by organising my raw data into findings. As previously noted I transcribed all my interviews fully onto a Microsoft word file. I made notes along the transcripts of other indirect data such as facial expressions and changes in the interviewee's moods or body language, as I feel it helped to uncover some interesting variation in the responses given by the temporary agency workers. I began by organising, reducing and coding the raw data and identified some recurring themes as well as some divergences. I then began to search for possible interconnections and relationships between these themes and I identified more sub themes as a result. These findings led me to relate back to the literature in some occasions and I was then able to narrow the data down to some rich interesting findings. I then drew my conclusions from the data relating it back to the overall aims of my research project.

Ethics

I was aware that having being introduced to two of the participants through my key informant who was in a perceived position of power as an 'insider' at the temporary work agency where

they were employed that they might have some reservations about taking part so I assured them that full confidentiality would be maintained and that any 'identifiers' relating to them and the organisation(s) they were assigned to would be removed. In order to ensure this I decided to use pseudonyms for each interviewee and the organisation(s) they had worked in. I also discussed with the participants that I was recording the interview, and that the data collected would be stored in a safe place and that no one else would have access to the data other than me. I assured them that I would send them a copy of the transcript and the finished piece upon its completion and that if they wished to have any of it changed or omitted I would do so. I then discussed the use of the consent form and the interviewee's agreed and signed the forms under their pseudonyms, as they felt reassured that their real names would not be in print. The information sheet and consent forms are attached in appendix A of this piece along with the list of questions asked in the interviews with the temporary agency workers in appendix B. The questions I asked the representative of the temporary work agency are attached in appendix C. Not all the questions in appendix B and C were asked in the interviews as the participants had answered some of them already, and there was some variation from the original planned questions however I had expected and had hoped this would be the case as I wanted the conversation to naturally unfold.

Limitations

Limitations of my research include only having one representative from the temporary work agency, and only workers from two agencies in total, this meant that by focusing on a small sample size the findings could not be generalised to the population as a whole, however as I noted previously my research was concerned more so with the in-depth subjective experiences of temporary agency workers therefore it would be impossible to generalise such

an experience. I also recognise that some of the participants might of suppressed some information when asked about their experience with the temporary work agency as they had been introduced to me by a representative of the agency who was in a perceived position of power, however given the responses I received I do feel that the research has high levels of authenticity. The research is also limited in the sense that there is no representation of management from within the temporary work agency or client companies which I feel would have given another layer of data that would be important in understanding the experience of the temporary agency worker. For further research a larger sample size of agency workers would ensure representation of all members of society including various minority groups and varying levels of social class. The participants in this study all described themselves as being of white Irish origin and given the growing number of migrant workers who find themselves in temporary agency work I feel this is where this piece of work lacks. However I do feel the research provides a stepping stone to further research in this area.

Findings and Analysis

Note: * Indicates pseudonym.

Participants: Cara* (32) works as an Information Technology specialist.

        Leanne* (22) works in various general operative, catering and cleaning assignments.

        John* (30) works in various general operative, catering and cleaning assignments.

        Michael* (29) works in Information Technology Support assignments.

        Angie* (32) works as a recruiter at a temporary work agency.

        Flexi-jobs* refers to a temporary work agency.

Once all five interviews were carried out I identified some recurring themes emerging from the data. Themes included perceived relationships with the temporary work agency itself, issues the temporary agency workers had with the quality of the jobs they were assigned, and experiences of alienation, stigma and sexual harassment. Issues around the pay differentials and fringe benefits arose also. I began to analyse the data thematically which resulted in the following findings.

Relationships with Temporary Work Agencies

I asked some probing questions in order to find out the relationships the workers had with the temporary work agencies, in order to find out what types of agencies they were, did they value their workers, and what skill level jobs they were facilitating. My research found that higher skilled workers or 'outside experts' tended to have a better experience of dealing with representatives of the temporary work agency then the lower skilled workers or 'routine periphery' workers. For example Cara* reported how when dealing with the temporary work agency she is currently employed by, she experienced a perceived genuine feeling of appreciation and loyalty towards her:

> *When on placement they (the agency) would ring me up and ask if I was getting on ok, if the company were treating me well, they always assured me that if I had any issues to tell them and they would deal with it. Flexi-jobs* always negotiate great pay and contracts on my behalf; I feel like they have my best interests at the front.*

However Leanne*, who carried out a variety of low skilled work such as catering, cleaning and general operative positions at multiple factories and events had a different experience of dealing with temporary work agencies:

> *You have to go into the office every day to sign your name in a book; it's to show your interest in getting a job. That's all well and good if you live local and can just pop up to sign it, but for the likes of me, I have to waste petrol driving in and pay for parking to sign this thing, all to prove to them I'm interested in getting work, surely registering with them in the first place should be proof enough?*

This dual experience of dealing with temporary work agencies is echoed by a representative of a temporary work agency. Angie* recruits for client companies across the skills spectrum including both outside expert and routine peripheral workers.

> *When you're dealing with the catering staff or the cleaners, it's usually hectic, because the companies usually hire them in bulk as there is a big event happening, so we get them all in for a group briefing before the event, whereas when you're dealing with the professionals they are usually one off contracts looking for specific qualifications, so they get one to one briefings prior to the placement. It's the only way to do it unfortunately; we wouldn't have the time or the staff to meet with every single person so it's easier to get them all in together.*

John* once worked on a catering assignment at a huge sporting event that took place over five days. Whilst he had no problem with the work itself he was left annoyed with the temporary work agency:

> *We used to leave the agency's office on a bus at 5.30 each morning and we would start our shifts at 6:30 and would work all the way up till 4, and if we were lucky, we might get a twenty minute break sometime during the day. We were told to be on the bus, ready to go at 4.30. It was a five day event and for four days out of the five, the bus didn't leave until 6.30 and we wouldn't get back 'til 8, cause of the traffic. Sitting on that bus for two hours, doing nothing was infuriating enough, but knowing we weren't getting paid for it too, well it wasn't fair. It was the agency's bus, so it was down to them, I thought they were badly organised to be honest. We got no explanation for it either.*

While Cara* reported a positive experience of dealing with the temporary work agency, both John* and Leanne* seemed exasperated at their interactions with the agency. Given the "hectic" example Angie gave of how the agency treated lower skilled workers by drafting them in groups this finding is to be expected. How temporary work agencies interact with their employees prior to assignments has a direct effect on how the employees perceive the temporary work agency. Temporary work agencies should give more one to one contact time to workers of all skill levels to ensure better relationships with their employees.

Job Quality

In Mitlacher's study he identifies important dimensions to assessing the job quality of temporary agency work, these are; the nature of work; job prospects; and compensation and benefits. The nature of work includes aspects such as the integration and social relations amongst workers and health and safety issues. Jobs prospects include looking at personnel development, job security and job duration. Compensation and benefits focuses on aspects such as pay differentials, fringe benefits and additional rewards (2008:448). I used Mitlacher's framework in analysing the job quality of each participant. I asked each participant about their current or most recent work assignment. Cara* spoke of her current placement in a successful software development company where she experienced a lack of integration with the core staff at the company:

> *We all eat in the same canteen on lunch and no one talks to you, like you would have chit chat with the other workers in the office, but it's all about the work your doing, and when we all leave the office and go to lunch, no one talks to you. They have their little groups and they just leave you to yourself. I suppose it's a bit lonely, I have tried to strike up conversations, but they're not interested. I just bring in a book with me.*

Although Cara has referred to some positive aspects in her placement whereby she and her co workers are sharing work related information, she does feel isolated from her co-workers once recreational time occurs. In contrast to this Michael* who is currently placed in a computer manufacturing firms IT support helpdesk reported positive experiences with his co-workers:

> *Ah yeah the lads are great craic, I'll be sorry when I have to leave this job, I've enjoyed it a lot.*

According to Mitlacher's framework, assessing job prospects include aspects such as personnel development, job security and job duration. Both John* and Leanne* who, at the time the interview took place were both currently not on an assignment and were waiting to hear from the agency in relation to this noted how they would sometimes feel frustrated at the transient nature of temporary work.

…like right now I'm in between jobs and your head would be wrecked waiting 'cause you worry about getting the rent paid and the bills and all. And you're never sure how long it's gonna be before your next bit of work, and then you're still worrying 'cause you don't know how long it's gonna last. It's hard to stay positive.

John's experience reflects what Mitlachers' research has found whereby "job insecurity is associated with a range of negative outcomes that influence the evaluation of the quality of a job as well as the psychological well-being and social life experienced outside the workplace" (2008:451). Leanne* was more concerned with her career development:

I'd love something more permanent because when you're working somewhere for the long haul they invest a bit of time in ya, and train you up and give you chances to go further up the career ladder.

The third and final tenet of Mitlacher's framework included looking at issues around compensation and benefits such as pay differentials, fringe benefits and additional rewards**;** this is discussed further in the final section of the findings and analysis chapter. In sum assessing the job quality of temporary agency work covers aspects such as integration

between workers, jobs prospects and compensation and benefits. It was clear to me that from the data I collected from the four temporary agency workers that there was a lot of anxiety in terms of integration with fellow workers on assignments, future job security, and career development.

Stigma

Goffman identifies 3 types of instances where stigma occurs; where there are defects of the body; defects of the character; and membership of socially devalued groups (1963). Research has shown that temporary workers are seen as members of a devalued group within the workplace and are stereotyped as such, as the prevailing idealism is that if you work hard enough you will get a permanent job, therefore temporary workers are seen as responsible for their fate. (Boyce et al 2007:8) Temporary workers as a devalued group hold little status in the workplace and one participant, John* felt this intensely when he was sent on a work assignment as a barman at a festival:

> *We turned up on the day and went towards the bar, and a fella called us over and asked were we the temps, we said yeah and he handed us black plastic bags and gloves and said were rubbish collectors. When I said to him we were meant to be doing bar work he said temps don't do bar work they do this work. I had no problem collecting rubbish, but it was the attitude of the fellas there towards us, that was the problem.*

John's experience reflects the stereotypic conception of the temporary worker and the overt stigmatizing treatment that temporary workers incur that Boyce et al refer to in their research as "direct statements regarding inferiority linked to one's work status" (Boyce et al 2007:13).

Experiencing stigmatizing treatment in the workplace can have negative consequences for temporary workers such as negative moods, decreased performance, withdrawal and counterproductive behaviours.

Alienation

As previously noted, according to Rogers "alienation signals a lack of control, a certain powerlessness felt by the individual and derived from the structure of social relations" (2001:232). Rogers framework for analysing alienation is largely based on Marx's conception of alienation whereby his "analysis of the social organization of work underscores the fact that people express themselves through their work, and in so far as their labour is merely a commodity to be paid for with a wage, they are alienated" (Bratton et al 2010:73) According to Rogers (2001) alienation occurs in three different forms, first, is alienation from work, second is alienation from others and third is alienation from self.

Alienation from Work:

Alienation from work has two components; that workers are not only removed from the product of their work, but from the work process as well (2001:234). In the case of temporary agency work, the workers are "twice alienated" from the product of their labour, as their labour belongs to both the client company and the temporary work agency. Temporary workers are alienated from the work process as they have a "lack of control over their work," conditions of their work, and a "lack of understanding of the purpose of their work" (Rogers 2001:235). John* was working a shift in a factory where he experienced alienation from the work he was performing.

We were making up cardboard boxes. Literally. From flat pieces of cardboard into boxes ready for packing. All we did was make the boxes, put them on a conveyor belt and they went on into some other part of the factory where stuff was put into them I would imagine. Haven't a clue what, I asked the fella who was with me and he wasn't too sure either, he said it was a food factory, so, some kind of food I would imagine.

John was working in a food factory and had not encountered any food. There was a complete removal from the finished product which led John to carry out work that he did not know the purpose of thus he became alienated from the work process.

Alienation from Others

Alienation from others derives from the lack of "relational characteristics particular to temporary work" (Rogers 2001:236). Temporary workers are structurally constrained from forming quality work relationships. They can be isolated from other agency staff as well as core staff at client companies. This is further compounded by the transitory nature of temporary agency work. Michael* spoke about his experience of feeling like an outsider during a previous placement at an IT firm:

Not the place I'm in now, but the last place, that was a disaster. I hated it. Even making small talk was impossible. They would just ignore you, they weren't bothered getting to know you. They went to team meetings at the start of the shift and at the end, and agency staff weren't a part of that, I don't know what went on at these meetings, it didn't involve me anyways 'cause I didn't have the same job as them but I presume they would

discuss targets and that, but from the get go you would feel like an

outsider.

This strategy of social exclusion Michael* experienced is a prime example of how when the "sole purpose of life is competition" then "all social relations are transformed into economic relations" (Bratton et al 2010:73) as he was omitted from target discussions where economic strategies are usually the basis of such meetings.

Alienation from Self

Alienation from self occurs through "emotional labour and identity struggles" (Rogers 2001:239). Research has proven that a high volume of women working in the service sector have experienced some form of self alienation. As temporary agency workers are representing the temporary work agency as well as the client company it adds further pressure on the worker to perform to high standards; "from putting on a happy face for the agency to tolerating abusive work situations" (Roger 2001:240). This can go against a person's natural instinct to retaliate leading to self alienation. The experience of alienation from self was reported by both of the female temporary agency workers I interviewed. Leanne* spoke about her time waitressing at an upmarket horse racing event where she was advised by the agency to perform in a certain way:

They said (the agency) that it was a posh event and that we would be

working in the boxes, where all the richest people would be, so that we

were to be on our best behaviour and to smile at all times and that we

should have a 'can do' attitude. Well, you don't mind that, like, you expect

to do that anyways when your waitressing, but when I was there I was

treated terribly by the customers, they were so rude, shouting at me and clicking their fingers at me, its true what they say, money can't buy you manners. Anyways I just kept on smiling, even though I was fit to kill.

Leanne's experience shows how she felt she was going against her true feelings and in doing this "people become detached from their true selves" (Bratton 2010:73) Cara also experienced feeling at odds with her true feelings when at the software firm:

Working in IT you have to expect that you will be the only woman there, it's all men. So, sometimes you're having a bad day or whatever and you feel a bit down in the dumps, maybe 'cause you have no girls to chat too, or that you're sick of hearing about football, anyways it's just one of those days and this would get picked up on immediately, I would get comments like ah cheer up it might never happen, or you're so much better looking when you smile. Men seem to think you have to look pretty all the time. So I would usually just stick on a smile and get on with it.

In sum, alienation is evident in the experiences of the Irish temporary work environment. As the experience of "alienation is seen as residing in the social structure of paid work rather than in personality traits" and the causes are "social rather than psychological" (Bratton et al 2010:206) it is important to acknowledge that the feelings of John, Michael, Cara and Leanne are results of larger social constraints caused by the organisation of temporary agency work.

Sexual Harassment

Rogers and Hensons study found that temporary agency workers were at an increased chance of experiencing sexual harassment at work. The above example given by Cara* is a case of

mild sexist treatment in the work place. Leanne* also experienced sexual harassment, except in this instance by a recruitment agency who she had called before she got work with the current one she is employed by.

> *I had called them first and they asked me to email my CV in, so I did and then I got a phone call from them and he just started to ask me really unprofessional questions like did I go out in Town much and did I have a boyfriend. Needless to say I hung up and never contacted them again.*

This finding reflects Rogers and Hensons' research where they found that "the low status, depersonalisation, and objectification of temporary workers fosters an environment in which poor treatment including sexual harassment is likely." (1997:233) Sexual harassment in the work place can have many negative consequences such as withdrawal from work and in Leanne's case it can act as a barrier for people accessing the employment market.

Union Membership and the Equal Treatment Principle

All four agency workers were not members of any unions and had never discussed union membership with any of the agencies they had been involved with. In relation to the Protection of Employees (Temporary Agency Work) Act 2012 one of the key principles is the principle of equal treatment in relation to pay. I asked Angie* about the Act and its implementation. She responded with an expected reply that was in keeping with the agency she was employed by.

> *It's very important we implement the recommendations of the Temporary Agency Act, and work in conjunction with the client to determine the comparable level of pay.*

When I asked her were there any issues with determining the comparable level of pay, or if the act had had any effects on temporary agency work in general she responded:

> *I'm afraid I wouldn't be the right person to answer that question, as that wouldn't be my area of expertise within the agency, maybe you could ask if someone in payroll might do an interview with you.*

I also asked the temporary agency workers how they felt in relation to the Temporary Agency Act 2012 and in particular how they were entitled to the same level of pay as their permanent co-workers and there was mixed responses. I also used Mitlacher's framework in approaching this topic as it included looking at issues around compensation and benefits such as pay differentials, fringe benefits and additional rewards which have an effect on job quality. Michael* replied with "I'm in IT so that doesn't really apply to me." I asked him to elaborate on this and he responded:

> *IT workers on contracts tend to get better paid. Some of my friends who work in the sector are in salaried jobs and I know for sure I get paid more than they do. But they do get pension plans and health insurance.*

Cara* gave a similar response:

"I get paid quiet well and I can save quite a bit, but as the work isn't always continuous I haven't signed up for any health insurance schemes, I just pay as I go there and I mean I'm not paying into a pension or anything. I definitely do worry about things like that alright, so I'm always on the lookout for something more permanent. But I have to say, the permanent jobs might have the perks but they pay less than the jobs the agency get you. It's like a catch 22 situation really.

When I asked Leanne and John how they felt about potential pay differentials between them and their comparable permanent co workers they replied:

Leanne: *Makes no odds to me, I usually get paid around the minimum wage level so I don't worry too much about it, once I get paid, I'm happy.*

John: *I don't think there is much difference in pay compared to the permanent staff as they only get in or around minimum wage, the same as we do, but the major difference is that they know they have work coming in every week, they have security, whereas we don't. And not only do we never know whether we will be working or not every week, but the banks wouldn't even look at ya for a mortgage and there is no such thing as a pension plan, and I earn too much for a medical card and too little to pay into health insurance either.*

In sum, the principle of equal treatment devised in the Protection of Employees (Temporary Agency Work) Act 2012 is a worthwhile protection for countries where perhaps there is no minimum wage level set. However in the Irish context the principle of equal treatment in regards to pay already exists, for low skilled workers in the form of minimum wage. Both low skilled workers, John and Leanne were not concerned with pay differentials as they presumed the level of pay for all workers in their skill set, both permanent and temporary were all set at minimum wage. What concerned John in particular was the lack of job security, as temporary work is never guaranteed as well as missing out on fringe benefits. High skilled workers Cara and Michael were also not interested in determining the comparable wage, although for different reasons than low skilled workers John and Leanne, but were more concerned with fringe benefits associated with the permanency of work such as pension plans and health insurance. As the Protection of Employees (Temporary Agency Work) Act 2012 does not distinguish between wages and fringe benefits there is a gap in its implementation. This gap leaves both low skilled and high skilled workers in a vulnerable situation.

Conclusion

Whilst this research cannot be generalised to the whole cohort of Irish temporary agency workers it has brought some much needed insight into an otherwise under researched area.

Some findings reflect what is already in international research; however some findings diverge from the norm. Irish temporary agency workers indifference to unequal treatment in relation to pay was an unexpected finding that I had not foreseen when I initially set out to do this research project. Temporary agency workers who were employed in lower skilled assignments felt protected by minimum wage levels, however they were they were anxious about future job security and the fringe benefits associated with permanency of work. Temporary agency workers who were employed in high skilled assignments were not as concerned about job security but were just as exasperated about missing out on fringe benefits. The National Recruitment Federation have already voiced their concerns in relation to determining a comparable level of pay as previously noted they have stated how "pay is complex, if it includes many fringes or associated benefits, annual bonuses, free parking etc, then the calculation of pay for short term assignments is impossible" (NRF 2014). This unresolved issue shows how the Protection of Employees (Temporary Agency Work) Act 2012 has major gaps in its implementation. Temporary agency workers although paid at a comparable level in their take home wage packets, are left vulnerable when it comes to fringe benefits. The Protection of Employees (Temporary Agency Work) Act 2012 is lacking when it defines comparable pay as it does not distinguish between wages and fringe benefits. This research has also uncovered experiences of stigmatizing treatment, sexual harassment and forms of alienation found in the temporary agency workplace that serves to strengthen previous research that has found these same conclusions. Whilst these experiences are common in temporary agency work they should not be expected as the norm. In conclusion, temporary agency workers are constrained by the organisation of temporary agency work. They have little room for resistance in the workplace due to the double commitment to the agency and to the client organisation; and therefore experience stigma, sexual harassment and

alienation. What minimal legal protection temporary agency workers do have has major gaps in its implementation which leaves temporary agency workers vulnerable and anxious over future protections and fringe benefits.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research project on temporary agency work.

I am conducting this research as part of my coursework for third year Sociology at the National University of Ireland Maynooth.

This interview may take up to one hour and with your permission we would like to tape record the conversation. A copy of the interview tape will be made available to you afterwards if you wish to hear it.

There are no risks involved in this research and the interview does not constitute any type of counselling or treatment.

The benefit to you is that you will have access to the research when it is finished and you may use it to understand how your experience compares with others or to the wider sociology literature.

All of the interview information will be kept confidential. We will store the recordings of our conversation safely. Your identity will be kept confidential and we will use a pseudonym to identify your interview data. Your name and private information will not appear in the final research project.

Your participation is voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part, and you may refuse to answer any questions or may stop at any time. You may also withdraw at any time up until the work is completed.

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact me at charissa.feeney.2012@nuim.ie or my research supervisor Peter Murray at peter.murray@nuim.ie

"I have read the description above and consent to participate."

Signed_____

Date _____

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Temporary Agency Workers

What is your age? How would you describe your ethnic background? How would you describe your educational background? How long are you registered with the temporary work agency?

Can you tell me about the temporary work agency you are registered with? Roughly how many hours do you work weekly? What is the pay like? What kind of jobs do you generally get through the agency?

What was your most previous or what is your current job like? What duties and responsibilities do have in this job? What did you like about this job? What did you dislike about this job? Did you receive any training whilst on this job?

Have you ever had any bad experiences while undertaking temporary work? What drawbacks are there to temporary agency work? Have you had any positive experiences of temporary work? What benefits are there to temporary agency work? If you had any problems on an assignment what would you do to rectify it?

Are you a member of a trade union? Have you ever been? Were you ever approached by any, or heard of anyone in the agency referring to unions?

What do you think of the 'equal treatment' principle in the Protection of Employees (Temporary Agency Work) Act 2012? Do you know if you are paid the same as the permanent staff at the companies you work for? Would you rather get a permanent job? Why?

Appendix C

Interview Questions for Representative of Temporary Work Agency

What is your job title?

What are the daily duties and responsibilities at your job?

What kind of a relationship do you have with your employees?

How much time do you spend briefing your employees before an assignment?

If an employee was experiencing any problems in their placement, what is the procedure in

relation to this?

What do you think of the latest piece of legislation - the Protection of Employees (Temporary Agency Work) Act 2012?

In what way does your agency ensure the 'equal treatment' principle of the Protection of Employees (Temporary Agency Work) Act 2012 in implanted with regard to pay?