Crafting the margins: Promoting dis-identification in temporary agency work

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Abstract

Contemporary work has seen the proliferation of temporary forms of employment where short-termism and indeterminacy of labour is valued over long-term organisational commitment. The rise of flexibility has brought about new questions which challenge some of the conventional management wisdoms around the preference for positive identification with the organisations. This paper examines how temporary workers are produced as flexible, transient subjects which only forge transactional relationships with contracting organisations. Drawing on data collected from a twelve-month ethnography of agency workers in the hospitality industry, this paper argues that contracting organisation actively encourage agency workers *dis-identification* through a variety of regulatory techniques which have deep seated effects of workers' self-understandings. This paper therefore argues that, in the context of flexible employment *dis-identification* can be reconceptualised as an effective mechanism of control.

Keywords: *Temporary work, flexible work, agency work, identification, dis-identification*

Given that temporary work is centred on flexibility, short-termism and indeterminacy of labour, this has brought about new questions around how such a workforce can be effectively managed and controlled. Scholars have questioned how organisations cheap, docile and flexible labour is willingly extracted despite the low commitment organisations foster with

their precarious workers (Burawoy, 2000). The prolific rise of temporary work in the UK (Lucas and Manfield, 2011; Maroukis and Carmel, 2015) has largely been catalysed by the organizational need for efficiency, using a workforce the meets the ebbs and flow of demand (Wills, 2005). This means that end users of temporary workers need to create systems of control that effectively craft 'a reliable contingent workforce, who are available to work everyday and whose work attitudes and job capabilities and personal attributes make them acceptable to employers' (Peck and Theodore, 2001: 492; Wills, 2005).

This paper explores examines the ways in which this reliable contingent is created. Through drawing a twelve-month ethnography on agency work in the hospitality industry, this paper finds that contracting organisations use a variety of technocratic and bureaucratic techniques to encourage agency workers to *dis-identify* with their respective organisations. The findings of the research therefore challenge the conventional management wisdoms around the preference for positive identifications with organisations, suggesting that where workers form a peripheral contingent dis-identification forms an effective mechanism of control. The paper firstly discusses some of the literature on organisational identification and dis-identification, followed by the literature on control of flexible workers, the second section discusses the use of ethnographic methods, the third section presents the findings discussing how agency workers are controlled through technocratic mechanism of control and how these are experienced at the level of subjectivity, the final section discusses the findings in relation to the literature.

Much of the contemporary work on control and regulation seeks to understand how commitment is fostered through the desirability of worker's identification with their respective organisations. Nearly three decades ago, Ashforth and Mael (1989) suggested that identification was an antecedent to organisational commitment and internalisation of organisational values, suggesting that social identity theory provides a convincing

explanation of why individuals may identify more or less with an organisation and therefore engage in activities congruent to the organisations goals. Scholars in this field have suggested organisations have social identities, that where an organisation's perceived social identity is congruent with an individual's identity then an individual is likely to identify. Of course, individuals may not necessarily identify, however the likelihood is seen to increase where the groups values or practices are distinct; the group is considered to be prestigious and out-groups are salient therefore reinforcing the importance of the in-group (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001). These studies have been considered to provide insights to organisations seeking to engender employee commitment.

Other scholars have taken a more critical stance on the concept of identities, considering how this has been used as a frontier of control by organisations (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). These scholars appreciate the complexity of identities, rather than seeing identity as a fixed construct, is malleable to organisational discourse. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argue that organisations seek to regulate workers' through targeting their identities through discursive organisational practices. These are specifically; defining the employee specifically, regulating the field of activity, defining social relations and regulating the ideal identity for the wider social context (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 15).

A number of studies have empirically examined the ways in which organisations have sought to co-opt workers' identities suggesting that organisations use cultural (Alvesson, 2001; Willmott, 1993), normative (Etzioni, 1964; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993), identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), bureaucratic and socio-ideological controls (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). These studies have explored the way in which the 'insides' of employees are effectively managed through corporate propaganda or 'bullshit' (Kunda, 1992), through roles or professionalization (Kuhn, 2006), creating elite identities (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006),

through jobs or skills (Watson, 1994) or through a combination of bureaucratic and discursive controls (Karreman and Alvesson, 2003). The literature in this field has provided useful ways for understanding how identity or subjectivity has formed an integral facet of organisational control. Producing appropriate individuals through encouraging identification in-line with organisational and managerial desires has been considered both a pervasive and insidious mechanism of control (Alvesson et al., 2008). However, much of this literature takes a discursive understanding of control, appreciating the looseness of discourse (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Kondo, 1990) and how individuals' have some agency to position themselves within organisational discourse (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

These studies have therefore not only shed light on how control is elicited from individuals but also around resistance to organisational discourse, suggesting that rather than individuals being 'organisational dupes' or being entirely totalised by organisational discourse as Kunda (1992) suggests 'the influence of propaganda as a regulator of identity may increase, diminish or backfire.' This agency has been explored through the literature on *dis-identification* which is seen to be a 'tactical response' amongst the workforce where individuals protect themselves from managerial domination (Costas and Fleming, 2009: 355). Studies in this vein have suggested that this is the negative side of identification where individuals may seek to discursively distance or protect aspects of their identities from reach of organisational cultural programmes (Brown, 2005; Mumby, 2005; Trethewey, 1997). These studies suggest that employees manifest *dis-identification* through private feelings of cynicism and scepticism (Fleming, 2005; Fleming and Spicer, 2005; Kunda, 1992), through holding 'something back' in work (Casey, 1995) or through humour and cynicism (Sturdy, 1998). *Dis-identification* in these cases was enacted defensively in the context of tightly controlled, paternalistic or high-commitment cultures. These socio-cultural contexts are seen

to catalyse reflexive thinking around the self and the tensions that are created through identifying with the organisation. Implicit in this theorisation is the concept that the self is dichotomous and that individuals reflexively protect a real or authentic self, from a fake or corporate self (Tracy and Trethewey, 2005). It should be noted that this dichotomy however doesn't imply an essential authentic self, rather an imaginary self or a workable fantasy of an authentic self (Roberts, 2005) that allows the individual reflexively negotiate their position in relation to organisational discourse.

This literature implies that *dis-identification* is a dysfunction of organisational control, where individuals craft space or distance from organisation in an attempt at being true to oneself. Failed attempts of management to co-opt or engender workers' identities are considered and affront to organisational control, although not always problematic as *dis-identification* can be seen as a way through which individuals distance themselves from the organisation while still performing work (Fleming and Spicer, 2005). Despite the theoretical insights drawn from this literature very little has been written about temporary employment and identity controls. This literature examines professionals, knowledge workers, management consultants- most if not all have relative stable, enduring relationships with their respective organisations.

The perplexing question around how 'consent' for labour is extracted in indeterminate, uncertain work has been explored by far fewer scholars, most of which have focused on meso and macro level aspects of the employment relationship. There are those that consider the structural disadvantage of workers as explanatory as to why workers are more susceptible to control in precarious work (Peck and Theodore, 2001; Theodore, 2003). Invernizzi's (2006) study of precarious employment in Brazil suggests that the saturated job market and thus the fear of unemployment has strengthened controls in precarious work that penetrate down to the shop floor Anderson's (2010) research focuses precarious migrant workers in the UK suggesting that migrants and the migratory process actually feeds into the construction of

institutionalized uncertainty. For Anderson, migrant workers' tendency to be used as hyperflexible subjects is rooted in the migratory policies that distinguish what constitutes a skilled and unskilled worker, that moulds employment relations and that fails to use punitive measures against employers that abuse the vulnerability of migrants. Other scholars have focused other structurally disadvantaged workers such as the homeless (Williams, 2009), migrants (Wills, 2005; McDowell et al., 2007; McDowell, 2008) and BME workers to explain how consent is elicited. These explanations tend to situate precarious work in the wider socio-economic and political context.

Other studies have found that the insecure nature of the relationship between temporary employee and employer, have intensified temporary workers' internalisation of organisational controls (Garsten, 1999; Gottfried, 1992). Williams (2008) suggests that insecurity is used as an ancillary force in an outsourced call centre, where the threat of losing contracts and therefore jobs was a rhetorical devise often drawn upon by managers to motivate their precarious workforce. The third party contracting relationship associated with temporary agency work has been considered cause chronic uncertainty in the labour process, effectively transferring discipline onto workers who feel threatened by their own dispensability (Gottfried, 1992). Insecurity has been suggested to have regulatory effects over agency workers, who internalize requirements on appearance, attitudes and behaviours when placed on job assignments (Garsten, 1999; McDowell et al., 2007).

Despite the insights sought through empirical studies on temporary work suggesting that workers are regulated through structural constraints or through the uncertainty of the employment relationship, workers' everyday experience of organisational controls and how these impact on the workers' self understandings are relatively unknown. The insights developed in the organisation studies literature on identification and dis-identification provides a fruitful lens through which technocratic and socio-cultural controls can be linked

with individual subjectivity. This paper therefore extends the literature on identification and dis-identification through an analysis of ethnographic data on temporary agency workers in the hospitality industry. The insights drawn from this analysis are manifold, first this paper contributes to understandings of temporary workers are produced as transient and transaction through organisational systems and secondly dis-identification as being a facet of organisational control for organisations who which to craft only transactional relationships with workers; second this paper provides greater understandings as to how temporary workers are effectively produced in work through an in-depth look at organisational controls.

Methods

We draw on a twelve-month ethnographic study of a temporary employment agency 'Staff Solutions' located in Cardiff. Over 80% of the workers Staff Solutions recruited were migrant workers or from the BME, this being unsurprising as the literature reports similar levels of over-representation among BME groups (e.g. Anderson, 2014; Anderson and Ruhs, 2006; McDowell et al., 2007). There were around the same proportion of workers from inside the EU as outside. Ethnographic methods were selected in order to gain an in-depth understanding of agency workers' experiences, the kinds of work they perform, and their interaction with others.

Ethnographic data affords insights into mundane cultural practices within organisations which are integral to understanding how migrant agency workers experience their work and allows both discursive and embodied aspects of work to be captured, gaining contextual richness that would not be achievable through interviews alone. The embodied experience of the work is as relevant and telling as what workers say about their experiences. Ethnography has been long accepted as an effective method in organisation studies. In particular, in identity studies, scholars such as Watson (2011), Kondo (1990) and Van Maanan and Kunda (1991) have drawn on ethnographies to shed light on how identities are complexly formed in

context. Kondo (1991) for example, uses ethnographic data of her reflexive experiences of part-time work in a Japanese confectionary factory, interweaving gendered, national and organisational discourses to develop rich understandings of how identities are crafted. Similarly, Alberti (2014) adopted ethnographic methods in her study on precarious workers in the hospitality industry, as a way of 'confronting workers in their everyday corporeal reality' and unpacking the 'nuances of social stratification in informal work' (2014: 6). Thus, ethnographic research is a useful method in both gaining deeper understandings of how identities are formed as well as shedding light on the nuances of socio-cultural contexts.

The data within this study was collected through a combination of observations, informal interviews and semi-structured interviews. The observations were collected during shifts, as the first author worked alongside the temporary agency workers. Here she was able to collect rich data of the embodied experience of being an agency worker as well as gain insight into the experiences of others. The observations were conducted over a twelve-month period between September 2012 and September 2013. Initially the researcher entered the field covertly, this was both to preserve the integrity of the data (Bryman, 2004) and further to win the trust of the workers. After around two months of data collection, the nature of the research was revealed to the participants (not to the temporary employment agency or the contracting organization), many of the workers were happy to participate in the study and regularly offered anecdotes from their daily working lives to inform the study. Informal interviews were conducted with over 30 agency workers and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 workers. The interviews lasted between one hour and two and a half hours, drawing out workers own situated understandings of their experiences, adding layers of depth to understanding the context and nature of their work.

Findings

Drawing on the experiences of agency workers in contracting organisations, this section analyses the material disciplinary practices used by contracting organisations to shed light on how the identity of the agency worker is produced while on shift. Specific focus will be placed on how mundane organisational practices form the basis of the agency worker identity and how this works to craft agency workers as marginal, subordinate and disposable in the context of the contracting organisation. Firstly, the data explores the situated practices, such as distribution of work, management of space, allocation of privileges and embodied controls that contracting organisations draw on in order to encourage dis-identification amongst agency workers. The second section goes on to discuss how these practices are negotiated by agency workers, discussing how the workers *dis-identify* with pejorative discourses constitute themselves as transient and craft their relationships with the contracting organisations as transactional. It is argued that material practices during shift create a pejorative agency worker identity that is formed in relation to regular workers, which encourages dis-identification as a mode of self-preservation.

Establishing the Organisational Pecking Order: Allocation of Tasks and Privileges

This section explores how contracting organisations use the allocation of work to produce pejorative meanings attached to agency worker identities and how the material practices are negotiated by agency workers. In contracting organisations, the allocation of tasks was significant to agency workers, not only in materially but also symbolically through the reinforcement of their marginal status and therefore their subordinated identities within the contracting organisation. Tasks would be allocated amongst both the agency and regular workers; agency workers were always allocated the more servile, tedious and laborious tasks.

More often than not agency workers were assigned dirty work (tasks that involved deep cleaning of unpleasant food or toilet waste) or hard work (shifting chairs and tables), for

example in the Radley breakfast shifts Mercie, an agency worker from Zambia, and I were frequently allocated such tasks including mopping floors, moving chairs and tables, or servicing and cleaning the food wastage area. This was always in contrast to the regular workers who were usually assigned, the most coveted work, back of house facing duties where workers had respite away the gaze of the customer and therefore freer to have personal conversations, sip coffee and relax the prescribed bodily stance of a waiter[1]. This was the source of frustration for Mercie who felt that the work had derogatory meanings for her and for the wider agency worker identity. It was a particularly busy morning and Mercie had been placed on food clearance which involved heavy lifting of stacks of plates, cups and vats of cutlery, scraping the remnants of old food into the bins and cleaning the area after. Looking particularly disheartened I asked if she was ok, she responded:

> No I'm not ok, I'm so fed up of this place. Being wrist deep in bacon fat wouldn't irritate me as much it I didn't have to watch that sadistic Kamilla (a regular worker) eating croissant and drink coffee while I struggle. We are meant to be here to help them out but we are carrying them. Without us they would crumble. But no to them we are agency workers - here to pick up all the shit.

Field notes: 13.05.12

Mercie's concerns were due to the division between regular workers and agency workers. For her, the dirty work she had been assigned served to highlight agency workers' relative inferiority. I had also experienced this division in the hotel Amici when five agency workers had been called in for an evening banquet shift. The regular workers had been sent to place glasses and napkins on the table settings, whilst agency workers were asked to bring the chairs up and set them out. This task involved hauling around 200 chairs up two flights of stairs and then placing them next to the place setting on the table. The work was exhausting. Maria a Brazilian agency worker poked fun at the obvious distinctions between the workers:

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[1] This embodied stance required workers to stand straight, hands clasped behind the back, feet shoulder width apart, no slouching and no conversing with colleagues.

> Why they didn't call the farm and bring donkeys if the just need people to bring carry these chairs? They don't need waitresses, they have theirs already.
>
> *Field notes 17.09.12*

Agency workers were therefore given little autonomy in the kinds of tasks they were asked to perform which was seen to signify their lack of value or worth within contracting organisations. Furthermore, given the premium paid for agency workers to Staff Solutions, contracting organisations wanted to ensure they got value for money by fully utilising agency workers' time and physical efforts. Where agency workers were caught without anything to do they were often reprimanded. Empty handed or inactive agency workers were considered problematic; management would often relay complaints to the agency about 'the lazy crew sent over' or assign workers to laborious, pointless, back-breaking tasks while the regular workers relaxed. Fiora expressed her concern about this allocation of work in her interview. She noted:

> Sometimes they give you some things to do; you can't see the logic in it. You feel like you're in a boot camp or something. It's like a pointless task that is just to show you that you have no power.
>
> *Fiora, Greece*

Given that identities are crafted in the relation to the 'other' (Alvesson et al., 2008), this clear distinction between allocation of tasks based on employment status served to reinforce the homogeneous group identity of workers as well as the subordinate status of those who identified as temporary workers within contracting organisation. This distinct agency worker identity was further strengthened through other material practices such as the allocation of privileges.

The distribution of privileges within contracting organisations also served to emphasise the low status of agency workers. The provision of meals was one of the most valued privileges that catering and hospitality workers enjoyed; workers often commented on how this would

save them the expense of buying food. However, the provision of food during a shift was not guaranteed for agency workers. There were venues that were particularly mean, these were often the outdoor catering companies and the larger hotel chains. Others were a little more generous. Yet for the most part, however, agency workers accepted that their low status in the contracting organisations meant that they were seldom afforded privileges.

An example of this can be drawn from a shift in St Sires Castle where we were scheduled to work on a seven-hour shift. When we had arrived at the Castle, the shift managers informed us that he would need us until 3am instead of until 11pm. This meant that we would be working eleven hours instead of the previously agreed seven. We had collectively agreed to stay on a little longer because DJ and Samjeeta said they were seriously short of hours[2] and were getting pretty desperate for money. However, accepting this extension of hours meant that we would be reliant on the organisation to provide a meal during the shift. The usual protocol was that after the food service, the leftover food would be divided and given to the regular workers. On this occasion although there was an abundance of leftover food, it was plated up and expressly reserved for the regular workers. This meant that none of the agency workers would eat until they got home in the early hours of the morning. At around 10pm we noticed that one plate of food had been left over - it had gone untouched for two hours and was cold and unappetising. Two agency workers, Mehn and DJ started to eat the plate of food between them. The shift manager walked into the area where the food had been kept and immediately questioned where the food had gone and why the plate had been touched. We remained silent making little eye contact with one another while the manager exclaimed, 'listen, any food that is on a plate is not yours. Agency workers don't get food unless you are

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[2] Given that agency workers are all on zero-hour contracts

told that's yours'. The inequitable allocation of food privileges were generally accepted by agency workers as being part of their marginal status with contracting organisations.

Material Markers: Aesthetic and Performative Regulation

The prescribed appearance of agency workers also served to deepen the division between regular and temporary employees- this made difference tangible and visible both staff and customers. In the majority of the organisations that agency workers were sent, the regular employees wore branded uniforms reflecting the corporate image of the company, yet agency workers were asked to wear distinctively different uniforms. Staff Solutions workers were given strict guidelines over their uniforms, being asked to wear either a white or black shirt with black trousers, black shoes and black socks. We were also told not to wear strong fragrances, to remove all piercings, wear no jewellery, have no 'crazy hair colours', apply only a little makeup (for girls only), have no visible tattoos, ensure that long hair is tied up and remove all traces of nail varnish. Mihaela, an agency worker from Romania, likened the uniform rules to that of a nun's habit, suggesting that adherence to all the rules is similar to ordination into the church. The rules on uniforms were stringent; they allowed little room for individuality or forms of self-expression, rather prescribed a homogenous form of identification for agency workers that symbolised their disempowerment within the organisation.

The various rules and regulations on uniform ensured that agency workers seemed entirely unremarkable to customers, whilst simultaneously creating them as a distinct to workers inside the contracting organisations. For agency workers, this reduced any possibilities of being seen as an employee of the contracting organisations. For the contracting organisation, this was often used as a way through which agency workers' could be identified by

management which would determine the spaces they occupy and their treatment within the organisation. Although for the most part uniform differences went unnoticed by the customer there were a few occasions in which uniform became relevant.

John, a Lithuanian-American agency worker had noted these distinctions when he had a disagreement with a guest on a shift in hotel Amici. John had explained to me that he was serving behind the bar when one of the guests who had been drinking there all evening had become quite unpleasant regarding his bar tab and charging his bar bill to his room. The system in the Amici Hotel only allowed this facility to those guests who had left credit card details at reception when checking in, as a guarantee of payment. John had explained to the guest that he would not be able to charge his drinks to his room because he had not provided his credit card details. The guest became unpleasant and told John that he would prefer to speak to an actual hotel employee. John, incensed by this reaction exclaimed:

> The guy didn't like my answer but I was following hotel protocol. He would have the same answer whether I'm wearing a uniform or not but he still tries to push his luck. You know something they see the black shirt and think ah this guy is an idiot, we can take the piss.
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> *Field notes, 10.11.12*

The distinguishable uniform was however on occasions used to the advantage of agency workers, non-membership was often used as a way to avoid the duties and responsibilities of dealing with difficult or awkward customers. Fiora explained this to me drawing on one of her experiences in Mayflower hotel:

> There are times where you think "ahhh I'm agency, I got a black shirt, see I don't work here – I don't need to deal with this". You know at that wedding we served at and there was the evening buffet, the guests were so pissed that they didn't hardly touch the food so the bride came up to me and was asking if she could pack all the food up and take it away with her. I know with the buffet and health and safety stuff it's like a complete no-no to keep food for longer than 2 hours or to let it go off the premises. I know all of this but I was like I'm not going to tell her, I don't have to deal with her kicking off, so I was just like, sorry I don't work for the hotel, I'll get someone who works here and knows more about it to answer your questions.

Fiora, Greece

Distancing oneself from the organisation in this way was a practice agency workers engaged in, using their uniforms as a material indication that they did not belong to the organisation. Paul reiterated a similar point in his interview:

> Sometimes I play into being an agency worker, you know we don't have the same uniforms as the lot of them so when I got someone being awkward I just point to my black shirt and pull out the whole "sorry I don't work here I'll get someone who works here to help you with that" card. At the end of the day I'm not paid enough to deal with bullshit.

Paul, Malta

For agency workers the uniform was simultaneously seen as a physical manifestation of their subordinate within contracting organisation as well as a strategic resource from which the workers could evade work and unpleasant encounters. The uniform served as a resource in workers dis-identification within contracting organisations, a way through material difference could be used as a way to distance oneself from the contracting organisation as a mode of resistance.

The body is an integral part of service work, in particularly in the hospitality industry not only appearance but also performance as inextricably linked with the customers' perceptions of quality of service (Warhurst and Nicholson, 2007). Always being under the customer gaze meant that workers were always 'on-stage' and were therefore directed by management maintain a certain posture: to stand up straight with hands clasped in front of them. Slumped statures against bars, work-surfaces and walls were considered by management as unprofessional, irrespective of whether this was an agency or regular worker. Generally, posture mattered 'on-stage' where workers' were watched by customers, yet for agency workers their postures were not only controlled when performing tasks front of house but were also monitored and regulated back of house. Many workers saw this as a desire by contracting organisations for agency workers to demonstrate physical exertion at all times.

The prescribed bodily forms were always more onerous for agency workers than regular workers and involved performances that intensified the strenuous nature of their work. For agency workers sitting down, leaning or resting against something while doing a job was never permitted even where not in plain-sight of the customer. Agency workers often commented on the onerous nature of this regulation suggesting that contracting organisations were 'keen to get their money's worth'.

In the context of the contracting organisations the embodied performance of work was a facet of regulation – management would impose tiresome, illogical expectations on agency workers when performing tasks back of house. Such impositions can be described as illogical or irrational because performance of tasks whilst sitting often did not impede the workers' ability to do their jobs, in fact most of the time it facilitated it.

This insistence on always standing was often a key source of frustration for agency workers. DJ commented on a shift in St Sires, 'man I need to take the weight off my feet; I'm not a cow or some animal that can just keep going and going' *(Research Diary, 16.08.12)*. A similar comment was made by Fiora:

> In most of the places they don't offer any chance to sit down, it's almost like we are not even human, we don't feel tired or pain. If their staff can't do it, how can they expect us to?
>
> *Fiora, Greece*

The onerous nature of the regulation yet again brought attention to the low status agency workers had within contracting organisations. Many of these workers passed comment on how the treatment and expectations of embodied performance made them feel subordinate and powerless:

> When I see all the rest of them (regular workers) sitting and chilling and then we get in trouble just for leaning on the work surface I think "what the hell am I doing here?"

We (agency workers) don't have any say, we can't even say nothing back. It's because we're agency, we are nothing. They don't really want us there.

Christina, Romania

Exclusionary Spaces

Organisations often formulated normative rules over space to the disadvantage of agency workers. Space in contracting organisations was managed in a number of ways. Principally it was organised through gendered, national and ethnic stereotypes and these applied to regular workers as well as to agency workers. However, given that a far greater proportion of agency workers were from migrant or BME communities, these national and ethnic divides were almost always synonymous with agency and regular worker divisions. Secondly, space was also more purposively organised according to status – either as agency worker or regular worker. These were often more obvious rules where agency workers were forbidden from certain areas or facilities. Some spaces in contracting organisations were considered contested, these were spaces that were neither forbidden nor permitted, rather were more ambiguous and often signified the tensions of agency workers' presence

The most obvious manifestations of exclusionary practices were the clearly defined rules stating that agency workers were not permitted to use staff amenities, such as staff changing rooms, bathrooms, lockers and staff canteens. These rules were replicated in all of the organisations I had worked in (on only very rare occasions were we granted access to staff canteens). I had worked on more than 40 occasions in the Radley and had only once been given access to the staff canteen and changing room. I had been told explicitly by one of the regular employees that agency workers were not permitted to use staff facilities; it was a rule they strictly enforced. Curtis, a British agency worker who worked in the Radley as a kitchen porter for two months, shared his experiences of these spatial exclusions. He told me that

although he had been given regular hours for two months consecutively this did nothing to improve his status in the organisation:

> That place man [the Radley Hotel], if we are given food, it's usually eaten while standing in the same place I clean the dishes. The only time I was allowed to actually go in the staff canteen was to clean it. You would think that because they know me and see my face every day they would think "oh ok this is a bit unfair or we feel bad for this guy" but no, nothing's changed since being there.

> *Curtis, UK*

Christina made similar observations in a hotel where we had been working for three days consecutively:

> They don't let us go sit and relax in the staff area like the rest of the workers and eat like human beings. They must think we are animals to stand and eat - like a cow. I end up now saying no to food if that's how I'm treated with it, I'd rather just go and smoke and at least feel like I'm still a human.

> *Christina, Romania*

On the rare occasions agency workers were permitted to use the staff facilities, organisational members still perpetuated the spatial divisions between agency and regular workers[3]. On a 13 hour shift in the Radley, agency workers had been permitted to take a break in the staff area. We were only allowed to take our break after the regular workers had taken their first pickings over the food. The staff area was set up with two long tables that were positioned parallel to one another, each surrounded by chairs. The regular workers had colonised one table, naturally the agency workers sat around the other. When we entered there was not a single word of conversation between the two groups throughout the meal. This silence was broken when one of the regular workers Alessandro stood up and asked if 'one of the agency can take our dirty plates back to pot-wash when you finish'. This request shocked me, however other regular workers simply left their dirty plates and cutlery on their tables when they had finished eating, expecting the agency staff to clear their mess.

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[3] The breaks when offered in the hotels were even given right at the beginning of the shift or towards the end of the shift which contradicted the purpose of a break. The beginning of the shift was probably the point that one felt most invigorated, not hungry or in need of a coffee and the end of the shift when only an hour of the shift was not the time when one needed the energy or rest.

Self-Position in Relation to the Organisation: The Transactional Self

For many workers the experiences of working in Staff Solutions was a negative one. Workers spoke about how they felt agency workers were generally portrayed as powerless, subservient, transient and lacking agency. Many of the workers considered their position in relation to the organisation's regular workers, and how they were considered second-class. Steve, for example, suggested:

> There are times where you go to places and you're not equal to the staff and they make you feel like you're an agency worker, that's what you got and that's all you are, so don't think high about yourself and don't look down on me.
>
> *Steve, France*

For Zalia, this negative construction had implications for the desired expectations for agency workers:

> In reality we are less than them (regular employees); we feel the employees from the hotel are their workers so they are much more than us. What the hotel wants from an agency worker is to do anything, to hear and shut up
>
> *Zalia, Portugal*

This can also be seen through the kinds of work given to agency workers. Their lesser status within contracting organisations meant that they were often given harder tasks:

> Cecilia: I definitely think agency workers get it harder than normal workers, but I think it's to be expected so to speak.
>
> Chloe: Why is it to be expected?
>
> Cecilia: Well we are not their staff, they don't have that responsibility over us and they want to keep their workers happy so if there is agency worker there to do the dishes or do some lifting obviously they will ask them.
>
> *Cecilia, Zimbabwe*

The dichotomy between agency workers and regular staff, largely created by the material conditions workers experienced while on shift had deep seated impacts on the ways in which

agency workers identified with the contracting organisations. The lack of positive sources of identification meant that many of these workers openly disassociated themselves as members of the respective organisations. These workers instead talked about their work in very instrumental and transactional ways, tending to identify with economic gain rather than their work or contracting organisations. Lenira a Brazilian agency often talked about how she valued the limited relationship she crafted with contracting organisations:

> I prefer to do the work and go. I don't like the work or the people or the place – I mean they treat us like shit, so actually it suits me that I can do my small shift and then turn my back. I don't think there is anyone who does this work because they like it, I think just give me my money and go.

Likewise, Christina discussed an occasion when some of the staff from the Hotel Amici has asked her to join them for a drink after a late night shift:

> They (regular workers) look offended when I say no to go for the pub, but come on I'm not here to be your friend, I spend the past six hours cleaning the shit and then I'm going to sit there with those guys? I don't think so. You know when I finish my shift I'm like 'just get me out of here'.

The agency workers therefore forged relationships with workers based on their experience within the organization which feeds into feelings of 'non-membership'. Agency workers rather identified with the economic transaction which appeared to legitimise their position with the organisation. Workers often justified their employment with the agency as either 'just for the money' or for other self-interested motives that were unrelated to the job. In an interview I had asked Fiora why she had decided to apply for work with Staff Solutions. Fiora had been working with Staff Solutions on a part-time basis for around two years yet her 'real job' (as she put it) was as a holistic therapist and dance instructor. She explained to me that:

> Well basically I'm working with Staff Solutions but its different hours each week depending on how much work I have on and how much Adrian going to call me to work. I don't like it, only when I absolutely have to, but it's that shortfall at the end of the month, I got all my things to pay and I just see it a quick way to get some money together

Fiora, Greece

Fiora appreciated the flexibility of agency work and although she hated the work it allowed her to pursue her other entrepreneurial ventures. Steve, an agency worker from Benin, made similar comments:

> I got this job as part-time in the beginning. I was working while I was studying my degree and that was ok because it's quite flexible and I can work around my exams and assignments. Then I graduated and I thought it will be easy to find work in my field but I couldn't – even in France you know it's hard there I think they are racist a bit there so I couldn't really find things that are acceptable. I just started to work full-time with Staff Solutions, I needed the money – it's not where I want to be but it's just about survival. Now I been working for more than 2 years as full-time and I can't say that I actually like the work but it gives me the time to think and work on my other stuff. As you know I'm working on my invention[4] which means I can just leave my shift and give that 100% of my attentions. Also I'm becoming more concerned about my dance and popping[5] and started to enter competitions, so I appreciate that I can leave my work at work and come home and do things I am passionate about.

Discussion

This paper has shown the ways in which agency workers experience some aspects of organisational control whilst at work. Whilst the ethnographic data tells as story of a number of technocratic controls, the discourses of the temporary agency workers reveals how these controls have far more deep seated effects. These effects are experienced at the level of identity, where workers are seen to internalise the pejorative identities created through technocratic rules (Karreman and Alvesson, 2003) in the contracting organisations which catalyses their *dis-identification* with these organisations. The contracting organisations use a variety of techniques which materialises agency workers 'otherness' in relation to the regular workers, this included allocation of work and privileges based on employment status, creating exclusionary spaces and controlling the aesthetic and performative aspects of agency workers. This had the effect of not only symbolically creating pejorative meanings around the agency worker identity but also but also reinforcing this through relational identities between

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[4] Steeve had told me that he was working on a prototype of a solar-powered phone charger. This was a way in which he put his education in electrical engineering into practice.

[5] Body popping is a form of urban/street dance.

agency workers and regular workers. In distancing themselves from their agency worker identity, agency workers negotiated a relational, transactional relationship with the contracting organisation.

Through this in-depth analysis of regulation in temporary agency work a number of insights are contributed to the literature. Firstly, the literature on regulation of flexible labour has been enhanced through greater appreciation of the mundane practices of work. Previous studies have focused on the macro socio-economic factors and employment relations that play a hand in regulating flexible employment (Anderson, 2010; Williams, 2009). This study concerns itself with bridging the meso-level organisational controls with how this is negotiated at a micro level. The second contribution this paper makes is to reflect on the dis-identification literature and how these concepts play out in the context of flexible forms of employment. This study suggests that contracting organisations, rather than seeking the identification of temporary agency workers, used technocratic controls to encourage dis-identification. Workers responded to this through their distancing of the self from the organisation and the construction of the self as instrumental and therefore forged only transactional relationships with contracting organisations. The identification and *dis-identification* literature suggests that positive identification with organisations forms an axis of control for organisations who wish to co-opt workers' identities (Alevesson and Willmott, 2002; Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Pratt, 2000; Kunda, 1992. This study suggests that encouraging dis-identification with the organisation was a strategy used by contracting organisations in maintaining transactional relationships with dispensable workers. Therefore, *dis-identification* in the context of temporary work is usefully reconceptualised as a facet of control which produces the ideal transient, transactional, flexible worker.

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