Crafting Identities in Insecure Employment: An Ethnographic Exploration of the Experiences of Temporary Agency Workers

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This paper explores the experiences of uncertainty and insecurity that migrant agency workers in relation to their work and socio-cultural context taking a specific interest in how these experiences are informed by and inform their self-understandings, or identities. The study of temporary agency workers' identities provides an interesting way through which the experience of multiple uncertainties and insecurities associated with temporary agency work can be explored and understood. Through exploring temporary agency workers' experiences, this paper provides insights into how insecure terms of employment are managed by workers on an everyday basis and both inform and are informed by worker's self-understandings. The findings suggest that temporary agency worker engage in identity work constructing themselves in three different ways, these are categorised as; the transients, the competitors and the compliers. Insecurity rather than being negatively understood is constructed in complex ways and feeds into a version of the self as an neo-liberal enterprising individual. For these workers enterprising identities are seen as cathartic in situations where work is insecure and uncertain.

TRACK: IDENTITY

Non-standard Employment the New Standard

Agency work refers to a plethora of atypical employment arrangements but all involving a third party that negotiates contractual arrangements between the employer and employee (Feldman, 1990). Agency workers are a form of flexible labour (Atkinson, 1984), situated in the margins of the organisation, often engaging in activities that are peripheral compared with those undertaken by the organisation's core workers (ibid). Over twenty years ago Rubin (1995) suggested, that the trend towards impermanence of employees is becoming a permanent feature of organisations, more recently figures suggest that temporary agency work has been at an all time high since the economic recession (Forde and Slater, 2014). Organisations have increasingly drawn on contingent flexible labour as a way of 'doing business' (Smith, 1998; Ward et al, 2000) particularly so in the hospitality industry, where the uncertainty in demand requires a workforce that is numerically flexible (Walsh, 1990). Here, peripheral workers are fast superseding the core, with almost half of all hospitality workers in the UK being on zero hour contracts (Office of National Statistics, 2014).

Despite the fact that almost 1.1million workers are sent out on temporary work assignments in the UK everyday (Lucas and Mansfield, 2011), relatively little is known about these workers' experiences of being temporary. Much of the literature uses quantitative approaches to analyse the working conditions of agency workers (Arrowsmith, 2006; Pedersen, Hansen and Mahler, 2004; Storrie, 2006; Voss et al., 2013), yet more in-depth understandings of the everyday experiences of being a temporary agency worker has only been explored by a few. Maroukis and Carmel (2015) conduct a comparative study of temporary agency work in Greece and the UK, they suggest that more often than not the rationale behind drawing on a temporary workforce is cost saving and the experience for agency workers is usually a combination of long anti-social hours, poor wages and underpayment of hours. Other scholars focus on the insecurity of agency work and the integral effects this has on workers' experiences.

The insecurity of temporary employment is considered to have multiple effects over the agency workers' experiences of work. Some researchers have suggested that this

uncertainty is liberating, providing individuals with space between organisations to craft preferred versions of the self (Casey and Alach, 2004; Gossett, 2006). However, far more studies have noted that the insecurity and uncertainty associated with agency work is constraining, operating as an insidious regulatory mechanism (Gottfried, 1999; Smith, 1998; Ward et al., 2001). For agency workers the uncertainty of this insecure work has been seen to be manifested through self-regulation- constraining their free choice around selecting preferred work (because workers fear that work will not be offered) (Smith, 1998), creating compliance whilst on shift (Gottfried, 1999), or as a way through which workers can be influenced to constantly self-monitor their actions, appearance and competencies (Garsten, 1999).

Other writers have suggested that the workers' experiences of temporary agency work are far more ambivalent and complex. Garsten (1999) for example draws on the concept of liminal spaces to discuss how agency work whilst being uncertain and therefore constraining can also be seen as a seedbed for cultural creativity where agency workers find the opportunity to create new subjectivities. Casey and Alach's (2004) study on temporary women workers suggests that their detachment from the organisations and the flexibility of the work gave the women the possibility to forge their identities from alternative life-style choices. Thus for some agency workers, the insecure conditions associated with flexible forms of employment are considered to have positive impacts on their subjective experience of work.

Temporary agency work as a form insecure work can therefore be seen as creating both symbolic and material anxieties for the worker (Collinson, 2002b). The symbolic anxieties of losing one's job or being uncertain as to whether you will be able secure work tomorrow are inextricably linked with anxiety of losing economic independence and therefore a sense of personal autonomy. An individual in fear of losing work may feel compelled to conform to organisational demands no matter how difficult or unpleasant (Palm, 1977). Temporary agency work is a key example of where workers are treated as 'anonymous and disposable functionaries (Collinson, 2002a),' where contract based 'nomadic' styles of working have increased employees' insecurities (Sennett, 2002) and where a sense of individualism corrodes social relations while increasing insecurities (Kallinikos, 2003). With these increased insecurities at play, the

way in which workers understand their own identities and relatedly how they act and interact in work becomes more complex. Identity becomes a salient issue for these workers as the parameters of work and the organisation become blurred which means job or occupation are no longer enduring or stable sources of identity.

Whilst the literature on temporary agency work goes some way into developing understandings of workers' experiences, the detailed relationship between work and identity have seldom been explored. Identity offers a promising lens through which the intersections between self-understanding and our connection with the social world can be examined (Ybema et al., 2008). Typically work and work organisation has often been considered as an enduring sources of identity (Bauman, 2001; Giddens, 1991, Sennett, 1998) yet given uncertainty and insecurity of agency work the relationship between work, organisation and identity is brought into question. The proliferation of temporary agency work brings economic insecurities surrounding paid employment into sharp relief (Burchell et al., 1999). Collinson (2002a) suggests that for many workers, a key source of insecurity is the material and economic realities of selling one's labour power in return for a wage. Thus in neoliberal organisations, the move to purchasing labour as a disposable commodity has been seen as both economically desirable as well as an axis of workplace discipline (Gottfried, 1991).

Notwithstanding the well documented increased insecurity in the contemporary workplace, the empirical studies on insecurity within management and organisation studies are relatively under-explored. Insecurity creeps into the identities literature, where the imaginary of a stable and secure self renders the individual in a constant state of anxiety (Jackall, 1988; Knights and Clarke, 2015; Knights and Willmott, 1999; Roberts, 2005). Insecurity within the organisation has been seen to be prompted by either management controls (Collinson, 1992) or discourse (Knights and Clarke, 2015) which reduces workers to a profound state of fragility. This is dealt with by workers through crafting alternative versions of the self which have been seen as self defeating (Knights and Willmott, 1999). In the case of University Academic's, the desire for a stable and secure self only exposed the multiple insecurities and fragility of identities- to this end identity projects are seen as a perpetually destructive cycle (Knights and Clarke, 2015). These studies refer to internal insecurities, the anxieties experienced by individuals over securing a stable, enduring and positive sense of self, whether this

be through work or other sources of identity. However, the insecurity discussed within this paper emerges from the very nature and context of work of temporary agency work. This paper throws light on the ways insecurity and uncertainty in temporary agency work is dealt with through everyday practices and how this has an integral impact on individual's self-understanding. This paper suggests rather than being monolithically understood as negatively experienced, insecurity is negotiated at the level of self understanding in nuanced ways. The following section explores the approach taken to identity further, taking specific interest in the fluid and constructed nature of identities.

Identity and Identity Work

This paper draws on a post structuralist reading of identity referring to how subjective meanings and individual experience with the world inform how individuals understand 'who they are' and thus 'how they should act' (Alvesson et al., 2008). It is through the experience and the discourses emergent from a multitude of organisations, institutions and social interactions that individuals reflexively craft a more or less coherent narrative of the self (Thomas, 2009). Following this understanding of identity, essentialism is rejected; rather identity is viewed as a discursive construction, maintained, resisted and modified through an on-going, day-to-day interactions.

Given that identities are considered to emerge from multiple discursive sources, both within work and wider society, identity work for critical scholars involves the negotiation with multiple and often conflicting discourses as they vie for attention (Kondo, 1990). Identity work has become a popular metaphor for understanding this crafting/controlling tension in the on-going formation of a sense of self, for instance when identities became threatened (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Collinson, 2003; Thomas and Linstead, 2003), where there are perhaps other possibilities for identification (Clarke et al, 2009; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Kondo, 1990), where individuals are stigmatised (Ospal, 2011; Ospal, 2012; Toyoki and Brown, 2014) and in resisting organisational attempts to control identities (Brown and Lewis, 2001; Costas and Fleming, 2009; Ezzamel et al., 2001). In such conditions the individual

reflexively creates, repairs and discards her identity in a continuing effort to repair self-esteem (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

Other identity scholars have noted the imperative for individuals to secure a stable and enduring sense of self (Knights and Willmott, 1999) and although this has often been considered as self defeating (Knights and Clarke, 2015) identity work in this instance is can be seen as cathartic, reinforcing a sense of authenticity (Humphreys and Brown, 2002). In conditions of uncertainty and insecurity an individuals seek to pin themselves to more enduring sources of identity (Willmott, 1999). Drawing upon the Lacanian concept of the mirror, individuals are seen to craft an imaginary stable ideal self or a workable fantasy through which their enduring efforts are expended to achieve this (Roberts, 2005).

Research on identity has viewed the process of identity work in a number of ways such as; through dialogue and the ways in which meaning is negotiated between the self and others (Beech, 2008); through narratives and in how individuals craft meaning around events through story telling (Brown and Humphreys, 2006); through discursive antagonisms where conflicting notions allow new meanings and identities to be sought (Clarke et al., 2009; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996), through the looseness or surplus of meanings in discourse allowing room for different identity projects (Kondo, 1990; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) or through everyday talk and activities of actors engaged in subtle identity politics (Ashcraft, 2005; Storey et al., 2005; Thomas and Davies, 2005). Identity work may also be considered a form of resistance given that employees in reformulating identities may resist those sanctioned by the organisation (Mumby, 2005).

This paper draws on these concepts of identity and identity work in order to understand how temporary agency worker's experiences of insecurity feeds into worker's self-understandings and thus relatedly how they perform their work. Identities considered as fluid, multiple and changing allows the exploration of how socio-economic contexts have implicit effects on how these workers craft their identities. Thus through considering the mundane actions and interactions of temporary agency workers this paper seeks to understand how social and economic insecurities are negotiated at the

level of identity in order to craft a more secure sense of self. The following section details the methods employed in order to collect the experiences and discourses of these workers.

Methodology

The uncertain, low-wage, low-skilled work that temporary agency workers are often employed in makes identity a salient issue. The uncertainty associated with temporary work also has implications for the ways in which workers internalise organisational discourse. Through taking an interest in temporary agency workers' identities this thesis aims to provide insights into how the work these workers undertake and organisations where this work takes place impacts on the workers' self-understandings, as well as how workers are implicated in the processes of identity construction, simultaneously negotiating their own identities in relation to others.

This paper draws on a twelve-month ethnographic study of a temporary employment agency 'Staff Solutions' located in Cardiff. Ethnographic methods were selected given that this study the in-depth understanding of the organisations agency workers come into contact with, the kinds of work they perform, and their interaction with others would provide insights into how temporary agency workers identities are impacted upon by their work, and with what effects.

An in-depth understanding of the organisations temporary agency workers come into contact with, the kinds of work they perform, and their interaction with others would provide insights into how migrant agency workers identities are impacted upon by their work, and with what effects. In order to get this richness of understanding, ethnographic methods came as a natural choice. Ethnographic research design is described as,

> A family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly in its own terms, the irreducibility of human experience.

Willis and Trondman, (2000:5)

Put simply ethnography is the immersion of a researcher in a specific socio-cultural context, participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said and asking questions either informally or formally (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This research design is usually open ended (Maxwell, 2004), seeking to understand how people regard the situations they face, how they view one another and how they see themselves (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This allows temporary agency workers to be understood in the context of their work, gathering whatever data best throws light on the issue of identities.

The appeals of ethnographic methods are aligned to gaining greater understandings of individuals in the context of their organisational settings. As Van Maanen and Kunda (1989) suggest, ethnography is capable of constructing a convincing on-going account of organisation life based on first-hand information,

> I have always believed, whether I have liked it or not, that we cannot really learn a lot about what 'actually happens' or about 'how things work' in an organisation without doing the intensive type of close observational or participative research that is central to ethnographic endeavour.

> Van Maanen (1989: 31)

Thus ethnographic observation provides insights into mundane cultural practices within organisations which are integral to understanding how migrant agency workers experience their work. Furthermore, ethnography has been increasingly considered an appropriate research method in the study of identity. Watson (2011) suggests that in order to talk about someone's identity it requires to a reasonable extent that the researcher gets to know the participant and the context in which they live and work. In order to appreciate the self in social situations, it is necessary to appreciate not only what people say but also what they do.

Ethnography allows both discursive and embodied aspects of work to be captured, gaining contextual richness that would not be achievable through interviews alone. This was evidenced in Barbara Ehrenreich's (2001) lucid accounts of the arduous work involved in her experiences of contract cleaning, scrubbing floors the old fashioned way on hand and knee, or perhaps Polly Toynbee's (2003) experiences of the difficulties of carrying heavy trays of wobbly custard slices in a job that paid some workers only £3.95/hour. The experience and doing of the work is as relevant and telling as what workers say about their experiences.

Watson (2011) also outlines the more general virtues of ethnographic research which include bringing to bare the complex nuances of organisational and social life as well as being able to situate data in the wider context in which they came into being. Ethnographic research is therefore considered to remedy some of the problems associated with relying on interview data such as the dislocated utterances and individuals upholding social roles in the context of the interview.

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 I worked alongside the temporary agency workers I 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. Informal interviews were conducted with over 30 agency workers and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 workers. The interviews conducted with agency workers draw out their own situated understandings of their experiences and add layers of depth to understanding the context and nature of their work. Over 80% of the workers Staff Solutions recruited were migrant workers or from the BME. As McDowell et al (2008) suggest that migrant workers are often over represented in flexible forms of employment given their relatively low-social capital. Indeed, being a migrant brings with it it's own specific identity issues and although these are not focused on specifically within this paper, these worker's understandings of the self and work are inevitably impacted by their national, cultural, gendered and religious backgrounds.

The proliferation of ethnographic methods within the social sciences has raised a number of concerns amongst scholars, sceptical of the validity and reliability of such

forms of data collection. As such criticism have been raised regarding ethnographic research's highly subjective accounts of organisational life. However, subjectivity is integral to most qualitative methods, not least ethnography, and should perhaps be embraced rather than viewed as a 'dirty word' of research. These subjective questions presented challenges in conducting my own research, this was partly due to my immersion into the context of the organisation and the rapport built with the participants and also to how my deep seated assumptions moulded the entire research process and the way in which I understood the context and discourses of the organisation and participants.

Through a process of reflexive practice, I constantly critically reflected on my assumptions laying these I also found it particularly challenging to temper my emotions when compiling my notes – quite often my accounts depicted my daily frustrations with work and individuals. Although ethnography is considered to be inextricably linked with the researchers own assumptions and values (Tedlock, 2000) this does not mean to say that the research should be entirely self-indulgent. Within my field notes I make specific effort to be more receptive to the discourses of the participants and to unpicking the taken-for-granted practices in agency work. In order to do this, I structured observations to ensure that I took into account what occurred around me. I did this through firstly taking note of practices and systems within the organisation, secondly observing participants' interactions with the organisation, management and other agency workers, and thirdly making a compilation of notes of my own experiences and reflections in a separate diary. Delamont (2009) makes clear that reflexive diaries and field notes should be kept separate through recording in different places in order to avoid the narcissistic tendencies of auto-ethnography.

Working in Staff Solutions

Staff Solutions is a national temporary employment agency that supplies workers on a temporary basis for catering and hospitality, construction, driving and administrative roles. My research was conducted in the catering and hospitality division of the Cardiff branch. This branch supplied unskilled workers to a number of organisations such as

hotels, contract catering units, restaurants and catering venues. The kinds of work that these workers engaged in was usually plate waiting, kitchen portering, kitchen assistant work and bar service.

Staff Solutions is in the business of flexibility. The agency charges a premium to organisations, not merely to supply a workforce (which an organisation can find themselves rather more cheaply) rather to supply flexibility, a feature highly desirable for organisations with uncertain demand. The operations within Staff Solutions is to recruit workers, which are held on their books and then to supply these workers to different catering and hospitality venues on a pre-agreed temporary basis. The length of temporary positions is variable – more often than not organisations use workers on a shift by shift basis, although on some rare occasions workers are contracted for longer terms which may extend to weeks, months or even years (although I have only come across one organisation that was regularly using an agency worker Vicky, for a period that had run up to 18 months by the time I left).

Staff Solution provides a kind of a middle-link liaison service between workers 'on their books' and organisations requiring temporary workers. This middle link was notably through Adrian, who was responsible for 'drumming-up' business from contracting organisations and distributing shifts to the agency workers.

For the workers, signing up with Staff Solutions can be best described as being permitted to enter into a smaller job market, one in which employment contracts are terminated within days, if not hours, and where experience and skill sets are irrelevant. Actually obtaining work is by no means a given in this system, rather it is the outcome of a system of regulation and politics, that dictate the ways in which work is allocated. Work in Staff Solutions is always scarce given that the agency always seems to have more staff on their books than shifts to distribute. This caused much anxiety amongst temporary agency workers who were often concerned about whether they would accumulate enough hours per week in order to make ends meet.

Shifts in Staff Solutions were often distributed at the last minute. More often than not contracting organisations provide very little notice to Staff Solutions of their staffing requirements which meant that workers were often called with just a few hours to get

to a venue. This caused some tension around free time, where workers were constantly 'on-call' in anticipation of work. These conditions resulted in a great deal of uncertainty and insecurity around work and thus resulted in worker's specific self-understandings developed within this socio-cultural context. The following section explores the ways in which temporary agency workers constitute their selves and construct positive identities within this context. These have been devised loosely into three categories of workers labelled the transients, the competitors and the compliers. These categories were formed on the basis of salient differences that emerged between the temporary agency workers discourses both material and spoken on work insecurity, work and the self. The salience of these differences refer to both the attitudes workers manifested towards others and their work as well as the workers' understanding of the self.

The Transients

The first group of workers have been considered to take positive meaning from their transient status as agency workers. In dealing with the insecurities associated with temporary agency work, these workers tended to construct their ability to source and secure work and their nomadic relationships with organisations as enterprising and a positive source of self-understanding.

Mercie is a migrant from Zambia, she had been working with Staff Solutions for around 18months. During a particularly slow Christmas period Mercie had made the choice to leave the agency, in an attempt to secure more work in a neighbouring city. Despite Mercie's relatively long tenure with Staff Solutions, she was by no means loyal to Staff Solutions. Although Mercie was keen to note the difficulties she had with the insecure nature of agency work, she constructed herself in rational economic terms, thus securing her identity through her own transience and ability to secure work through a nomadic lifestyle,

> The work just isn't here. I go where the work is. It's the reason I'm in the UK in the first place. I've always seen myself as a bit of a Bedouin anyway (laughs) and that's how I've got to see myself now.

> *Mercie, Zambia*

This discourse was resonant amongst many of the agency workers, who suggested that their transience not only in the organsation but also within the UK was a wider signifier for their detachment from the work they do work and their identification with economic gains that could be achieved through work,

> I can't say that I enjoy this work, the instability- you know, not knowing if you will get work that doesn't bother me as much. I've lived in the US, Ecuador, Lithuania and now here (UK) and I have always been like that because I'm not looking for a stable life but because I'm chasing a buck and I see this as all part of that. I go where the resources are, I can pick up other work where I need to

> *John, America/Lithuania*

In highlighting their transience, temporary agency workers construct the insecurities associated with their work as part and parcel of being economically driven. This group of workers often sought work from a number of different organisations and didn't view the insecurity of work as negative rather it was linked to their identities as economic migrants. George, a Greek migrant has come to the UK in search of work after the financial recession that had hit the Greek employment market. Although he was aware that his competencies, accumulated through his education and experience, far exceeded the work he was doing, he viewed the ability to develop a portfolio of work through a number of organisations as a testament to his own determination,

> The reason I am here is because I can find a bit of dignity through work, no matter what it is. Imagine in my country I have two Master's and can't find a job, there's no dignity in that. I have to use my initiative and go to find the work, even if it's only 10 hours a week I'm getting here, I go somewhere else and have another hours and then another place. At least I stand on my own two feet and say I pay my bills and don't ask no one for nothing, I don't care if I'm cleaning toilet for three different companies.

> *George, Greece*

Dignity and positive meaning for George was developed in economic terms, through the ability to be self-sufficient. The result of this, in turbulent times, meant that George sought work in a number of places, constructing a positive sense of self from his proactivity in seeking work. Many other temporary agency workers had developed this portfolio of work, for example Fiora had set up her own holistic therapy business which meant that she had alternative streams of income. She used agency work as a way to make ends meet when her own business was quiet,

> Well basically I'm working with Staff Solutions but it's different hours each week depending on how much work I have on and how much Adrian going to call me to work. I can't rely on that kind of work, but that force me in some way to create my own career, with my dance and my therapy stuff. I am one of those people who don't like barriers and structure so it works for me, free and I can move around a lot.

> *Fiora, Greece*

The transients were therefore a group of workers that constructed the insecurities associated with temporary agency work as a wider symptom of their nomadic lifestyles. These workers saw the transience associated with temporary agency work a place where positive meanings such as 'dignity' and 'freedom' could be constituted through their ability to seek resources. Insecurity is central to their self-understanding and formed the basis for the ways in which relationships were formed with organisations.

Being secure for these workers was not achieved through space and place, but through their own ability to engage with multiple organisations to receive work. For these workers' detachment from their work and organisation may be considered as a form of portfolio or boundaryless career (Cohen and Mallon, 1999; Gold and Fraser, 2002; Grote and Raeder, 2009) where workers actively seek paid employment from multiple organisations or express a willingness to move around to find more resources. Workers in this situation took positive meanings from the insecurity of temporary agency work, reconstituting the uncertainty associated with their work as a seedbed for creativity and autonomous work and in turn constructing the self as resourceful.

The next group discussed are labelled the competitors, these are a subset of workers that, in the face of insecure work, engaged in fierce competition with their peers.

The Competitors

The competitors sought to deal with their insecurities through constructing their selves as hyper-competitive in an effort to stabilize their tenuous labour market position. The experiences of insecurity, due to the precarity of work and limited availability of shifts, was understood by these workers to be a zero-sum game. Thus, gaining shifts in Staff Solutions was testament to how well these workers played the game. Where workers sought to win favour from Staff Solutions through their performance, this was usually considered in relative terms. Therefore, these workers were often disinterested in how they well carried out their work per se but more interested in how effectively they worked in comparison to their peers. Many temporary agency workers performing on shift were usually reflexively aware of how their actions may be used to valorise their own performance whilst belittling others. Shifts often involved a series of one-upmanship games, where agency workers considered themselves to be under constant pressure to prove themselves as more efficient and capable than their agency counter-part. Mario a Portuguese migrant explained,

> I do what it takes to make myself be the forward one [stand out] in the places. We all the same to them (clients), so I try to give a service that makes me be in front from the rest of them (agency workers).

> *Mario, Portugual*

This created a form of competitive compliance where workers sought to ensure that their performance on shift stood out from the average. However, more often than not more cunning strategies were adopted which sought to decrease other agency workers' credibility in the workplace. The competitors engaged in dirty games where misbehaviour on shift would be swiftly reported back to Adrian, forming an insidious layer of concertive control through peer surveillance. However, amongst these

workers, competitive attitudes were condoned if not expected due to the insecurities of the work. Mikhael rationalised this, suggesting that the nature of agency work requires these hyper-competitive attitudes,

> This agency is 'dog eat dog' or survival of the fittest. You can't say everything in your heart because the people here want to see you mess up. What everyone [agency workers] wants is more work. If they take you out of the game then maybe it's [going to] mean more work for them.

> *Mikhael, Morocco*

This competitive behaviour stimulated individualism and distrust amongst workers. Christina a Romanian migrant reflected on her understandings of how agency workers were highly individualized as a result of this competition. She suggested that this had been part of the reason she had lost consistent day time work in a college café an outcome of the insecure nature of work and the competition this fostered,

> I had that college job before. That was one of the best jobs I had from Adrian because it was easy and so near my house. The people was nice there, all the students is friendly. I really loved that job. I think I was pregnant, maybe three months at the time and I don't know why but one week my feet became so swollen so I couldn't wear my work shoes. I was wearing my trainers until I could go to town to buy new shoes that was going to be more comfortable for me. Before I even had the chance Cecilia who was working there with me told Adrian about my trainers. I know that because he rung me and told me that I needed to sort out appropriate footwear.

Steve also spoke of his awareness that people inform Adrian of things that happen during shifts. He suggests that he regulates his actions in order to avoid being subject to the competitive tactics of other agency workers,

> I find it difficult to work with some people, especially Kevin or Ben – the guys that are usually placed as shift leaders. They are like Adrian's eyes and ears.

They tell him everything. So I usually mind my own business and just get on with my work.

Steve, Benin

Despite being disliked amongst many agency workers, it was often accepted that exhibiting these enterprising, individualistic and competitive attitudes was intrinsically tied to being able to secure more consistent of work within Staff Solutions.

When you are on the receiving end it's not nice. I wouldn't do it myself but I can see why other agency workers do it (report on) to each other. I mean we all out for ourselves, and the work is hard to get- I don't think you can criticise people for wanting to make a bit of money.

Christina, Romania

Amongst those engaging in competitive behaviours, this was often understood as a necessary evil of agency work. The imperative of gaining shifts was central to Tariq's self understanding and competitive behaviours were seen as essential to achieving this,

Nobody likes to be seen as a bad guy but I didn't come here to make friends, I came here to work. If I see something is wrong on shift, yes I do tell Adrian, I don't lie, I don't say anything it's not true. But if I see someone is not on the standard, absolutely I will tell that back. If I don't, only someone else will and if it gives me a chance of getting more work then 110% I'm going to do it.

Tariq, Morocco

Mario made similar reference to competitive behaviours of agency workers play on one another as being part and parcel of being successful in Staff Solutions. I had asked him his views on agency workers' reporting on one another and he explained that,

When I first started in here I was thinking 'oh what bastards,' you know they all telling on each other and trying to show the other one as the bad worker. I was thinking if you just try hard in here and are good at your job you will be ok. But then I realised it's not really enough, so I just think OK it's every man on his self and if you need the work you have to find a way.

Mario, Portugal

The rhetoric of 'each man for himself' seemed synonymous with conceptions of individuals as 'economic man.' Obtaining work with the Staff Solutions was often considered testament to a workers' entrepreneurial abilities. For the competitor's insecurities led to a self that was positively determined by the ability to obtain work.

The competitor's experiences of insecurity led them to understand their selves in economic terms where ego ideals (Freud, 1914) or ideal identities (Schwartz, 1987) were determined by relative economic gain. Insecurity bound these individuals ever closer to a discourse of economic rationality, where any ethical responsibility or sense of collectivity to other workers was disregarded. These activities were part of agency workers' wider self-understandings in somewhat individualistic and Darwinistic terms, where competing against and undermining other workers was seen as a necessary evil.

The Compliers

The compliers are a group of workers that felt their identities were intimately linked to their success in agency work. In the face of insecure work, these went over and above their duties, either working longer than the shift required without remunerations, accepting poor work or making the self constantly available for work. This group were disliked amongst many agency workers, given their popularity with Adrian who distributed the work. However, these workers took positive meaning from their propensity for hard work and their ability to find work in situations of insecurity. Like

the competitors, these workers were saw their pursuits as individualistic and enterprising and sought positive meaning through securing work.

Mihaela a single mother from Romania commented on how her popularity with Adrian was very much connected with her willingness to engage in hard work, even at the cost of her personal life,

> I know I am a bit popular with Adrian, I think you noticed that, actually I think everyone noticed that (laughter) but I really had to prove myself as a good worker to be in that place. I used to go any time and any place to work even doing dishes and I broke all my nails[1]. I don't care I just say "yes, yes, yes". I even used to leave Boian (her son) with the old lady next door to run to do a shift. Then when I go to work I'm working really, really hard.

> *Mihaela, Romania*

Mihaela was an extremely hard worker, her attitude towards even the dirtiest most degrading forms of work was always positive. It was easy to see why she won the favour of both the agency and contracting organisations. However, Mihaela was aware that this admiration was not shared by all members of staff,

> I know that the people here been jealous of me but I don't care, I hear them all the time saying things about me, but I'm not here to make friends, I'm here to do my job and do it well. That's what makes me feel happy, not friends.

> *Mihaela, Romania*

Glory a recent migrant from South Africa had suggested that she gained positive meaning from her determination and the diligence she demonstrates in work,

> Even on my days off I am waiting for the phone to ring. Yesterday I went to meet my friends in the city centre for a quick drink but I had an orange juice

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[1] Mihaela was particular fond of her long nails and would go to great lengths to avoid cutting or breaking them.

because I was thinking ok Adrian might call and I wouldn't want to turn up to a shift tipsy. I carry this sports bag everywhere with black trousers, black shoes, black shirt and a white shirt just in case I get the call. It's not that I'm worried that turning down four hours here or there will kill me – it's about showing Adrian that I am the best possible person, the most willing for the job, he will always get a yes from me. Other people worry about work and shifts, but my work ethic brings me through all that.

Glory, South Africa

Maria a Brazilian migrant spoke candidly about the amount of unpaid labour she participates in through the agency; however, she was not critical of this practice. On one occasion we had worked for 45 minutes over our finish time and again this was not represented on our time sheets. When I said that we should complain, Maria explained,

Sure I work over sometimes and I don't get paid for all of it. If I start being pedantic over my timesheet they may call Adrian to send someone else. People need to realize that there is a lot of competition out there and you can only win it when you give 110%

Maria, Brazil

The concept of competition was resonant in many of the compliers' discourses, their perception of the wider economic environment was pertinent to their self-understandings in particularly in context of uncertain work. Steve, a Beninese migrant reflected on how the scarcity of work meant that only those willing to engage in hard work would be successful,

Listen we all struggling but that's the world we live in. I get a lot more work in this agency because my own pride will not let me to do half a job. I give my all and I think people recognize that, especially in these times. Some of the people in Staff Solutions they do the job only to the minimum and then complain like

'oh I don't have shifts' or 'Adrian has favorites' and I'm thinking no if you put the magic touch then you will be sure to get more shifts.

Steve, Benin

For these workers, obtaining work with the Staff Solutions was therefore considered testament to a worker's entrepreneurial abilities in times of turbulence and high unemployment. As Daoud explains,

Basically if you didn't get that much in the agency you either didn't need it or want it enough. There is work there but you have to be smart and learn the ways to get it. I mean if you're good it makes sense that they will call you first. You know what I mean. If you are really smart and you prepared to work hard you will get a lot.

Daoud, Tunisa

This group of worker's construct getting work in challenging and uncertain conditions as a positive source of self-understanding. This was intimately linked with discourses of work ethic, hard work and dedication. These workers, rather than critically reflect on their current situations or the system of agency employment are compliant with the uncertain conditions of agency work.

The compliers derived positive meaning from not only securing work in insecure and highly competitive conditions but also through their propensity to engage in hard work. The discourse of work ethic was considered a positive source of identity for these workers who saw themselves as instruments of financial accumulation. Work ethic and self-sufficiency was therefore cathartic to self-understandings in times of uncertainty and insecurity and was considered an enduring. The experiences of insecurity for the compliers are resonant of Kuhn's (2006) depiction of a demented work ethic, where the insecurities compounded through temporary agency employment result in a blurring of organisational and home life. Knights and Clarke (2015) suggest that insecurity can be consider a 'mixed blessing' as it is a catalyst for productive power.

However, in the case of temporary agency work the benefits of this productive work are limitedly received by workers.

The Enterprising Subject in Times of Insecurity

This study offers theoretical and empirical insights into the identities literature illustrating how temporary agency workers engage in complex negotiations with their work in order to craft more positive, secure, self-understandings. The data demonstrates how temporary agency workers are able to deal with insecurities in situations where work is uncertain and how this results in highly individualised and instrumental workforce. Unable to construct salient and enduring identities from their insecure forms of work, these more readily identified with the economic or social capital benefits of employment rather than the employment itself.

A more nuanced depiction is offered of the ways in which temporary agency workers' insecure terms of employment are managed at the level of identity and manifested through agency worker's actions and interactions. Although the data gathered suggests that temporary agency workers deal with insecurity in different ways, either through their transience, competitiveness or compliance, the identity work engaged in through material practice and spoken word aims to craft more positive self-understandings that were pinned to their ability to obtain greater volumes of work. As wage labour was seen as a way through a positive self was crafted, it may be viewed that insecurity is an affront to a positive self and that is negotiated at the axis between discourses of the self, the other and the organisation. However, insecurity was differently experienced for these workers and although securing work was considered to be positively experienced at the level of self-understanding, insecurity was not necessarily understood as the antithesis of positive identities. In this case, the propensity to manage insecurity whether this be through transience, competitiveness or compliance was considered to positively reinforce self-understandings.

For these workers', wage labour and securing work becomes a fundamental part of their self-understanding, however these identities are achieved in a context where the boundaries between employment and unemployment are ill-defined and where membership of an organisation can seldom be interpreted as 'being in work'. In this context temporary agency workers interpret their selves in a plethora of ways either as being individualistic, transient or compliant. Despite the various identities crafted through discourse, these workers were compelled by the desire to conform with an enterprising version of self, that was defined by their own ability to secure work. This paper has shed light on the multiple ways in which temporary agency workers deal with their uncertain and insecure working conditions. The transient, competitive and compliant categories of workers were each characterised by their unique ways of dealing with insecure work in order to achieve more positive self-understandings. Despite their different approaches to insecure work all of these workers were highly individualised, competitive and rational. This can be read under the wider discourses of enterprising self (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2007; duGay, 1996; Rose, 1989; Vallas and Cummins, 2015) where individual subjects promote a competitive, self-regulating and flexible self-understanding. The literature on enterprising identities suggests that flexibility, competitiveness and individualism are considered normatively desirable (Beck, 1992; duGay, 1996; Fournier and Grey, 1999; Gee, 2000). For these workers, in contexts of insecurity the discourse of enterprise offers a consistent and more secure self-understanding.

Therefore, a more virtuous, positive version of self in this situation is not necessarily bound with the nature of the work, rather the amount on work received within the very challenging and highly insecure context. It may be argued however, that the internalization of a version of the self that is enterprising further destablises identities as seeking stability through conditions of instability ties workers ever closer to the highly insecure and uncertain terms of agency employment, creating an increased sense of anxiety over failing to secure work (Knights and Clarke, 2015). Moreover, the identity work as self as a rational economic man either through competitiveness, compliance or transience reinforced the individualistic nature of temporary agency

workers and therefore makes any potential for collective resistance against their subjection to insecure and sub-standard work highly unlikely.

This study therefore highlights the importance of appreciating how insecurity is understood and experienced by temporary agency workers– since insecurity at work feeds into workers' understandings of self. In particular, the imperative of entrepreneurialism, while considered in relation to professional, managerial or career workers (e.g. Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008; Bruni et al., 2014; Cohen and Musson, 2000; Doolin, 2002; Down and Reveley, 2004; Essers and Benschop, 2007; Fenwick, 2002; Vallas and Cummins, 2015) has not been fully appreciated within low paid and temporary work. Moreover, this study speculates on the self-defeating nature of securing an enduring self through an entrepreneurial ideal as it not only adheres workers ever closer to the insecurities of agency work but also thwarts the potential of collective sources of action.

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