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White-Collar Proletariat?

Braverman, the Deskilling/Upskilling of Social Work and the Paradoxical Life of the Agency Care Manager

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Abstract

- *Summary:* This paper considers the experience of a small cohort of agency care managers¹ ($N = 23$) in the context of the ongoing debate about the deskilling of social work. Evidence is presented and discussed in relation to post-war studies of the labour process and asks whether Braverman's proposition that deskilling is an inevitable outcome of capitalism's labour process has any relevance in explaining whether agency social workers are 'white-collar proletarians' or not.
- *Findings:* The article identifies that there have been important changes to the social work labour process, including the regimes of care/case management and the subsequent intensification of employee workloads and deskilling (particularly for agency workers). However, for agency workers there are important processes that have stood to contain the full impact of proletarianization.
- *Applications:* The evidence provided suggests that 1) social work is still experiencing significant forces of change which continue to extend the process of proletarianization; 2) the expansion of the private sector in social care and the continuing reliance upon agency care managers remain but two examples of such detrimental change for both social work and service users/carers; and 3) without resistance deskilling and marginalization are likely to continue.

Keywords agency care management crisis flexibility proletarianization social work work intensification

Introduction

Ideas and attitudes about the nature of work and employment have changed significantly over the past 50 years (Watson, 2003). Nowhere is this more apparent than within the vigorous debate regarding the deskilling or

re/upskilling of the labour process. Although a range of stances have emerged, it is possible to identify two dominant camps that have developed largely in response to Braverman's seminal thesis (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (Spencer, 2000). First, and in a similar vein to many of the optimistic beliefs about work that prevailed during the 1950s, Braverman's much maligned but compelling account of the tendency for industrial societies to disempower and deskill workers through a variety of management strategies has been rejected, in favour of paradigms which stress forms of employment upskilling. Here there has been a tendency to underline the growing importance of employee flexibility (choice, discretion, autonomy and so on), knowledge and the use of new technology for workers in the labour process. Such stances are also typically codified 'into a post-Fordist, post-modernist or "new industrial era" discourse' (Littler and Innes, 2003: 75). Second, and in direct contrast, there has been scepticism and pessimism of an opposing camp that has been part of a tendency to modify but largely support Braverman's thesis. Such accounts were most prominent during the 1970s (including Littler, 1982; Adler, 1985), although similarities remain with a more recent emphasis placed on the proliferation of inflexibility, job insecurity and low wages for many workers (Dominelli, 1996; Heery and Salmon, 2000; Spencer, 2000; Jones, 2001; Ferguson and Lavalette, 2004), which have since extended into many parts of the service sector (Beynon, 1992; Ritzer, 1993; Andresky Fraser, 2001). The analogy of an epistemological pendulum might be drawn, in which the deskilling/upskilling debate 'has swung back and forth across the academic generations' (Littler and Innes, 2003: 73).

Social work has witnessed the development of a similar debate, again largely pivoting around the themes identified and explored by Braverman. During the late 1970s and early 1980s radical social workers such as Bolger et al. (1981) and Simpkin (1983) identified with Braverman's vision of a partisan labour process, and highlighted the increasing dominance and control over front-line state social workers by managers (Harris, 1998: 839–41). Such largely theoretical claims of management control and deskilling have since further developed into a spate of research around 'new managerialism', in which labour processes and the employment *culture* of the private sector are directly applied to welfare organizations such as social work (Holman, 1993; Clarke and Newman, 1997; Jones, 1999, and many more). Most notably Harris (2003: 5) has proposed the formation of a 'social work business' since the late 1980s in which:

... the culture of capitalism has colonized the public sector as business thinking and practices have crossed the public–private sector divide and been transplanted into activities such as social work. As a result social work has shifted to operating in accordance with a 'quasi-business discourse' within which the explicit or implicit assumption is that social work should, as far as possible, function as if it were a commercial business concerned with making profits.

Ife (1997: 24) and others have taken this further and suggested the imminent demise of 'traditional' social work:

Many of the ideological and organizational foundations of social work practice, as traditionally understood, seem to be crumbling, and it is not clear whether what will take their place will be able to support the social work profession in anything like its present form. (Cited in Powell, 2001: 21)

Despite this, claims that a loss of discretion for social workers followed the integration of social work into the welfare state apparatus (Jones, 1983) and the advent of core marketization and new managerial processes such as care management (Lewis and Glennerster, 1996) have been regularly challenged. Parsloe (1981: 60), in an ambitious government-funded study of 32 area social service teams during the late 1970s, highlighted a lack of organizational procedure for social workers, as well as the limited influence of area team managers and the relatively high degree of discretion enjoyed by front-line workers whose 'only aid' was 'their diary'. In relation to the development of care management, Payne (1995) and Sheppard (1995) have questioned much of the criticism regarding any loss of identity by practitioners and suggest that care management instead represents merely a new form of social work. Finally, Postle (2000: 24) has suggested that care management epitomizes our new (post-modern) world of relentless flux, and 'is in the process of being, rather than an entity which has become. As such there are seeds of opportunity for further challenge and change' for social work.

This paper considers the 'epistemological pendulum' that has continued to swing in relation to the changing sociological analysis of work and employment, and the implications for studying the experiences of agency social workers. Drawing from recent empirical research and experience, it is proposed that 'locum' work paradoxically offers evidence of both upskilling and deskilling, flexibility and inflexibility, for occupationally transient practitioners. Despite this, further investigation reveals that many examples of labour process upskilling for agency workers lead to what were identified as forms of surreptitious deskilling, in which new and sometimes elaborate skills, often learnt quickly 'on the job' or in training, lead in practice to new forms of deskilling. Finally, labour process theorists who have previously suggested the emergence of a 'white-collar proletariat' in labour markets (Crompton and Jones, 1984) will be considered in the light of the experience of agency care managers.

Method

The article is based on a series of semi-structured interviews with 23 (4 male, 19 female) agency care managers and 3 employment agency representatives. Each agency care manager was a qualified social worker based in a social service department (SSD), and qualified experience ranged from 6 months to 15 years. Three SSD teams were selected, two specializing in work with older people and the third in work with people with learning disabilities. Each care manager was interviewed on at least three separate occasions between

September 2000 and October 2003, and typically each interview lasted for over one hour. In addition a series of focus group meetings involving up to four agency care managers at a time were completed. Finally, the author was employed as an agency care manager from April 2000 to October 2003 and some of the data draws from personal experience and ethnographic data collected and analysed. Interviews with the three agency representatives lasted just over two hours, and each member of staff was interviewed once only.

An initial small sample of nine agency care managers was selected in the three teams studied (one older people team in London, one older people team in Merseyside, and three sub-teams within the learning disability team in Merseyside). This initial sample then increased to 23 via 'snowballing' techniques, although each employee interviewed worked in the same three teams initially selected. The original strategy was to gain access to as large a sample as possible as part of a convenience sample method. Two adult specialisms were selected and they included older people and disability. This was based on an assumption that distinct client groups can experience different forms of care management (Lewis and Glennerster, 1996). Within each team care managers were made aware of the project and those willing to be interviewed were approached. Then they were asked to provide names of other potential employees who had been employed through an agency in adult work around older people and disability, and who were willing to be interviewed. This 'snowballing' sampling process (Bryman, 2004: 100–2) increased the initial sample from 9 to 23.

The research formed part of a recently completed PhD which sought to consider the experiences and attitudes of care managers in both London and parts of Merseyside (Carey, 2004). The construction of semi-structured questions for both individual interviews and the focus group meeting were based around a three-part but interrelated research strategy. The intention of the strategy was to:

1. identify the advantages and disadvantages of independent agency employment in comparison to local authority-based employment as a care manager;
2. discover the attitudes and opinions of agency employees in relation to a set of themes which included the extent of employee discretion enjoyed; treatment by managers or supervisors whilst in employment; the extent of client and carer contact; and employment rights and restrictions experienced;
3. compare changes in employment outside social care with those experienced directly by both care managers and agency care managers alike.

A convenience sample was utilized due to the practical necessities of the project and the benefits of immediate access that this method produced to an author employed through independent agencies. It is recognized therefore that (as in the spirit of all small samples) the sample utilized may not be representative of the experience of agency workers in general, and bias may

have influenced some of the findings (Bryman, 2004: 100–1). Despite this, the extensive ethnographic research undertaken by the author (and discussed above) may have overcome any such bias within the overall project.

The Deskilling/Upskilling of Work, Employment and Social Work

The post-war years in relation to attitudes to work and employment began with a strong sense of optimism, particularly regarding the belief that new technology would lead to a demand for new skills and more fulfilling forms of employment for workers. Such views epitomized the then long established attitudes in relation to ‘modernity’, in which a strong and largely unquestioned belief in the enhancing and emancipatory power of reason, science and new technology prevailed (Kumar, 1995). Littler and Innes (2003: 74) also suggest that such optimism continued throughout the 1950s, and most of the 1960s, in relation to work and employment:

... research on technology and work organization was dominated by theorists like Woodward (1970), Blauner (1964) and Touraine (1962), all of whom tended to see automation as leading to occupational recomposition and an upgrading of skills compared to the limited job requirements of assembly-line production (Adler, 1985: 22). Underlying this perspective was the notion that the design of work operations could be ordered analytically in order to distinguish phases of technical development, and that ‘behaviour is most constrained when technical design is “incomplete”, in the sense that human performance is a partial stopgap in the man-machine mixture’ (Meissner, 1969: 256). This implied that technology could be the source of optimism as automation proceeded.

Theories were constructed which assumed an ‘evolution’ of skilled work that would run in parallel to developments in new technology. In tandem, social work, which largely persisted on the fringes of the NHS at the time, maintained a largely unquestioned and positive structural–functionalist/bio-medical inspired embracement of professionalism and client pathology (Younghusband, 1978; Jones, 1983). Indeed perhaps in the spirit of the initial optimistic welfare state endeavour there was a tendency for the social work profession to exaggerate its *possible* achievements – particularly within the nucleus of the family, itself held within the gaze of the ‘trained expert’ (Jones, 1999).

However, any such idealistic views of work were not to last, and during the late 1960s and 1970s opinions swung sharply, and a new era of scepticism and pessimism surfaced. Criticism of the structural–functionalist paradigm included a reconstructed vision of technology as not encouraging employee emancipation, but instead generating elaborate and highly rationalized forms of worker control. Extensive deskilling in relation to forms of ‘scientific management’ became a rallying call for many in the study of work, particularly following the publication of Braverman’s thesis (1974). Drawing on Marx, Braverman had highlighted the struggle for control of the labour process around the points of

production – and management strategies in response which ‘attempted to ensure that the worker’s skills and knowledge were subordinated to the authority of her employer and embodied in . . . increasingly mechanized or routinized tasks’ (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2004: 303). Braverman argued that despite the possibilities of worker resistance and respite, this tendency was leading to the proletarianization of the employee in most spheres of work.

Radical social workers were particularly influenced by Braverman’s thesis and used it to criticize state social work. The detrimental impact that managers were allegedly having on their subordinates within recently formed social service departments or ‘Seebohm factories’ was stressed. Despite this, such stances were widely criticized for lacking empirical evidence, as well as underestimating the discretion enjoyed by many front-line workers at the time (Harris, 1998; Powell, 2001). It is also likely that, as with some later interpretations of ‘new managerialism’, depictions of seemingly consensual management strategies were somewhat one-dimensional and simplistic, and failed to acknowledge themes such as gender or class, and that some front-line managers may question, resist or are often themselves victims of organizational policy (Carey, 2004).

However, in many other fields of employment, extensive empirical research was undertaken into employee proletarianization, with evidence of both deskilling and upskilling presented (for example Zimbalist, 1979; Wood, 1982; Crompton and Jones, 1984). For example, Crompton and Jones (1984: 95) discovered widespread evidence of deskilling amongst clerical workers in the south of England, but also highlighted the impact of gender and the tendency for ‘the majority of male clerks who stay[ed] in “mainstream” non-manual [service sector] employment [to] be promoted’ and thus avoid much of the deskilling, as well as enjoy select forms of occupational upskilling.

By the 1980s, despite high unemployment and the impact of neo-liberal reforms (Gamble, 1988), a new sense of optimism re-emerged in relation to the deskilling/upskilling debate. The ‘flexible specialization’ thesis developed, and post-Fordist theorists argued that new technology demanded a wider degree of discretion at work in order for more sophisticated technology to be utilized to full effect. In particular, the culture of the production line was wholly inappropriate to the extensive and pioneering impact of the IT revolution, which demanded a skilled and ‘knowledge-rich’ workforce. There expanded a belief in the ‘de-Taylorizing’ or ‘reprofessionalization’ of work and employment, as well as the increase in occupational manoeuvre and flexibility for employers and workers (Littler and Innes, 2003). Social work meanwhile tended to be caught between two political stances at the time. Here a divide between a dominant yet conservative functionalist paradigm emphasizing teamwork, quality assessments and the importance of professional values (Davies, 1994) emerged, against an increasingly fragmented ‘radical’ faction stressing the consequences of neo-liberal reform, deskilling, managerial dominance and issues in relation to ‘race’, gender and disability as sources of client and worker oppression (Dominelli and McLeod, 1989; Jones and Novak, 1993; Powell,

2001). However, much of the optimism which had suddenly embraced the sociology of work and employment was not echoed throughout social work, particularly since a hostile government and media appeared to threaten the preservation of state social work (Franklin and Parton, 1991; Stevenson, 2005).

Since the early 1990s the dominant paradigms within studies of work and employment have tended to divide and stress either the significance of 'knowledge capitalism' and the increasing need for continuing education and training leading to a general process of employee upskilling (Littler and Innes, 2003: 76); or continue in the mode of Braverman and highlight the expansion of low-paid and menial forms of work, many of which are now saturated within the extensive service economy and utilize many methods and work cultures adapted from Taylorism and the factory (for example Ritzer, 1993; Beynon et al., 2002). Such opposing views have been echoed within social work, particularly since the reforms of the Children Act 1989 and the NHS and Community Care Act 1990 led to the development of case/care management (Carey, 2004).

Radical Change and the Development of Care/Case Management

The development of care/case management throughout the 1990s represented the most radical reform of social work since the recommendations of the Seebohm Report (1968) were initiated during the early 1970s (Lewis and Glennerster, 1996). The impact of the reforms on front-line practitioners cannot be overstated: they were sweeping and extensive, and led to dramatic changes in how state social work was practised (Simic, 1995; Dominelli, 1996; Pithouse, 1998; Postle, 2001 and many more). Indeed for many the development of care/case management has signalled the end of 'traditional' social work, and led to a new age dominated by intense bureaucracy, resource rationing, a powerful yet fragmented independent sector (Carey, 2004) and a tendency for social work departments to become increasingly concerned with protecting themselves *against* vulnerable clients, carers and families (Jones, 2001).

One of the most heated debates has centred on the extent to which care/case management has led to the deskilling of state social work. Pithouse's ethnographic research (1998: 59–60) in two area social service departments (SSDs) in South Wales during the mid-1990s highlights this process:

A decade ago, paperwork was seen as peripheral to the central project of child care, ten years later there had been a significant change . . . it was now seen as a major plank of practice and one that, in [the social workers'] view, demanded diligence and reliability . . . a range of significant others [such as the police, lawyers, magistrates] would now read the various written productions that practitioners might have to submit for formal scrutiny . . . [and] 'outsiders' were unlikely to appreciate the extent to which social workers were now engaged in administrative procedures that could never be anticipated even a few years ago.

A chorus of intense criticism emerged following the nationwide reforms of state social work throughout the 1990s. Hadley and Clough's interviews (1996) with professionals in both health and social care revealed a strong sense of anxiety and disillusionment in relation to often intense resource rationing, bureaucracy, managerialism and reorganizations that were seemingly ongoing for practitioners within the fields of community care. In one interview with a manager of a mental health social work team the pressures to conform to a culture of compliance were stressed:

Who doesn't make waves and doesn't criticize the system and doesn't raise her head above the parapet [becomes a 'model team leader'] . . . If they bring out a policy that is just unworkable, never say it is unworkable. Just accept it and work with it as you can. (Hadley and Clough, 1996: 143)

Simic (1995: 13) suggests that, as with many prior reforms within the NHS, care management has taken responsibility away from the Government in the 'centre' (for service provision or quality), and moved it instead to the care manager at a local level. Both Jones (2001) and Postle (2001) highlight an extensive loss of discretion for care/case managers, and also articulate a growing sense of employee alienation from the state 'social work' role. Such stances tend to echo much of the sentiment of Braverman's thesis, notably regarding the expansion of scientific management and the separation of the hand (of the worker) from the brain (of the manager) in the arena of work:

The separation of hand and brain is the most decisive single step in the division of labour taken by the capitalist mode of production. It is inherent in that mode of production from its beginnings, and it develops, under capitalist management . . . but it is only during the past century that the scale of production, the resources made available to the modern corporation by the rapid accumulation of capital, and the conceptual apparatus and trained personnel have become available to institutionalize this separation in a systematic and formal fashion. (Braverman, 1974: 126)

However, as discussed earlier not everyone within social work has identified with the pessimistic interpretation of care/case management. Biggs (1991) stresses the relevance of care management to social work, particularly noting the importance of the provision of a 'care package' as a tangible *end-product* for the assessor/client. This can also draw upon personal and interactional psychodynamic approaches and skills in the process. In a similar vein, Irving and Gertig (1998: 13), drawing from a sample of 15 care managers, question the validity of some of the 'alienation' literature. They instead suggest that 'care management does not yet appear to herald the end of social work but rather a re-evaluation of role, skills and professional identity'.

The Age of the Agency Worker

In relation to agency workers there is limited research and publication available within social work, most of which has tended to appear in weekly publications such as *Community Care* (Carey, 2004). This is in contrast to the sociology of employment, which has developed a growing interest in temporary workers (Forde, 2001; Kunda et al., 2002; de Ruyter, 2005), where again contrasting views have emerged. Forde (2001: 631) cites Labour Force Survey figures and notes the rapid expansion of agency workers in the UK. In 1984 there were 50,000 locum workers employed and this figure had risen to 250,000 by 1999. He goes on to stress that many employers tend to use locum employees 'as a method of selecting suitable workers for direct employment'. In addition the 1998 UK Workplace Employee Relations Survey discovered that '59% of firms used temporary staff to provide short-term cover. Adjusting the workforce in line with demand was cited as a reason by 40% of firms, and covering for maternity by 22% of users.'

In general, most sociological research has tended to be critical of agency work, emphasizing the economic insecurity and social marginalization experienced by temporary employees, particularly women (Nolen, 1996; Rubery et al., 1999; Vosco, 2000). There has also emerged literature that has highlighted that 'there may be a desire to escape from, or adjust to, deteriorating conditions of work in public (sector) organizations by workers' (Kirkpatrick and Hoque, 2006: 650). Casey and Alach (2004: 476), however, in a qualitative study of 45 women temporary workers in New Zealand, question this stance. Within what has become known as the 'free agent perspective', the authors argue that temporary work offers many women an easy accessible source of varied employment which offers freedom 'to pursue more satisfying, more interesting, more varied and more relational lives than those available to the majority of men in full-time employment'. There is an acknowledgment by the interviewees of a 'risk' of becoming deskilled and marginalized within temporary work, but still 91% of the sample identified with a positive and in part emancipatory range of opportunities offered by agency work. In addition, the majority had *deliberately* chosen temporary work above prior permanent posts for the reasons cited.

Finally, social work has experienced a rapid expansion of agency workers over the past decade. Once a negligible part of the social work workforce, agency workers now constitute an important aspect of SSDs, and in some parts of the country it is not unusual for agency staff to make up half of social service teams, and some of them are the longest-serving members of staff (*Community Care*, 2003). The Social Services Workforce Survey of 2003 (SSWS, 2004: 7) estimated that between 1 April and 30 September 2002, SSDs spent £114m on agency workers, in contrast to £71m in 2001. In September 2003 there were 4500 long-term (over six months) agency staff employed in England and Wales, or 2% of the total SSD workforce. There are also currently over 70 agencies supplying social workers in London, where three-fifths of the total number of

locum social workers are employed (*Community Care*, 2003). This expansion has also been echoed elsewhere. For example, in the NHS in England, expenditure on agency staff 'increased threefold between 1997/98 and 2002/03: from £216 million to £628 million' (cited in Kirkpatrick and Hoque, 2006: 650).

Flexibility and Choice

One of the most apparent advantages offered by agency work to the employees interviewed ($n = 16$) related to the high degree of flexibility and choice in relation to available 'work placements'. Agency care managers argued that the number of employment agencies in their respective areas had increased over the past five years. Inevitably this was likely to be in relation to an increasing demand for temporary workers, which, as one senior manager who worked for a recently established agency explained, was due to 'the high turnover, and shortage of, social workers around the country'. For temporary workers this outcome had obvious advantages – most notably a range of vacancies to choose from throughout most periods of the year. For the agencies themselves 'business [was] booming', as another agency representative explained, and, as the same employee later pointed out, a typical agency care manager 'on [work] placement for a year' would earn her company around '£25,000 per annum'. It was highlighted that significant profits were accrued by employed agencies, and much of this capital was resourced from public funding and migrated abroad, often to the US (Carey, 2004).

Some of the agency workers interviewed ($n = 7$) had previously been in a position to choose between two or three different placements at a time for each post, which inevitably permitted more discretion in relation to other lifestyle or domestic commitments. Such flexibility, which also extended to being able to leave an unsatisfactory temporary job and find another in a relatively short period of time, meant that agency work was popular with some workers. Flexibility, however, did not relate only to which organization or location work was based in, but also sometimes extended to when the working day started and finished, and which days of the week were worked. This type of discretion, however, was never guaranteed, but was instead dependent upon ongoing negotiations between individual SSD team managers and their respective temporary employees. Despite this, many workers ($n = 14$) argued that they usually came to a mutual agreement with their supervisor that suited both parties.

Such formal and informal flexibility offered by agency work for most care managers suggests that Casey and Alach's assertion (2004), that dominant views of temporary employment as being exploitative have been exaggerated, has some substance. The importance of flexibility to workers cannot be overstated, and research has tended to highlight that employee alienation and disenfranchisement can be reduced if workers are offered greater control over the number of days or hours worked each week. Also opportunities to take annual

leave or switch sites and types of employment can exist (Strath, 2000). In comparison to staff on permanent local authority contracts, such discretion was at times significantly greater for agency staff, a privilege which meant that for some workers a permanent post remained unappealing, as Casey and Alach (2004: 471) have also noted:

Many of the women [$n = 45$, working as administrative temps] had been offered permanent roles while on temporary assignments, and most had declined these roles in preference for continuing to take up temporary assignments. Those reporting that they had accepted permanent positions had, at the time of interview, returned to temping . . . Many report that they will not accept or will terminate early assignments that are 'boring' or 'silly jobs' or if 'you don't like the people'.

Despite this, not all temporary care managers were keen to remain in locum work. Indeed several had been looking for a permanent post for some time, and believed that the benefits of added security, more days' annual leave and a right to sick/maternity leave more suited their personal circumstances. Finally, evidence which has stressed the significance of age discrimination within the labour market, particularly for the over 40s (Standing, 1986; EFA, 2000; Duncan, 2001, and many more), might help to explain why younger graduates were so keen to stress the flexibility and choice offered to them by agency work. Indeed the majority of the sample ($n = 16$) were under 40 years of age, and over half of the remainder were over 40 and actively looking for a permanent post ($n = 4$).

Experience and Social Capital

Another benefit cited by a majority of temporary employees ($n = 18$) related to experience gained, which was viewed as being a privilege of agency work. Rather than 'being stuck with one team, one client group', as one employee remarked, agency work offered an opportunity to readily access a number of teams, and movement between placements was an established norm for most workers. Here the potential to learn new skills, as well as gain social capital (or 'network') were significant, and some workers revelled in the opportunity. Most notable remained younger graduates, some of whom also felt that they did not have adequate prior experience gained during either their DipSW training or their previous work/voluntary roles.

Agency care managers were also usually able to move *across* client specialisms, such as from older people to disability or mental health, an option not typically available as a permanent local authority care manager based in a single team. However, migration between children/family and adult teams was uncommon, and in general most workers ($n = 15$) had never moved between the two broad client specialisms. It is worth noting, however, that in the view of the employment agency representatives ($n = 3$), voluntary sector organizations do not generally recruit through employment agencies, and certainly not to the extent that health service trusts or SSDs do. This is important, as many of the

agency workers were keen to find employment in a voluntary sector organization, and as only a few vacancies became available each year through the agency, this reduced the flexibility and experience available. Once again, although discretion was available and cherished by workers it was never guaranteed or complete.

For most employees a range of skills were appropriated through agency work. Diverse skills might be learnt from authority to authority, or client group to client group, and were likely to be due to the wide variety of care management approaches applied within and between local authorities (Lewis and Glennerster, 1996). Here assessments and review procedures, forms of management, types of teamwork, and in general an array of work and organizational cultures were different from authority to authority. In this context, agency workers were able to compare and contrast different organizational approaches.

Such a culture of occupational migration in which new skills and methods were acquired in different settings provides another example of upskilling for transient workers. In addition, as with the care/case management role in general, employees noted their increased knowledge and awareness over recent years in relation to a range of business skills and concepts such as contracting, costing, partnership, and stakeholder engagement/empowerment, as well as ICT. Despite this, such 'new skills' were not always appreciated by many workers ($n = 16$), who argued that they did not represent 'real' social work and also, as some suggested ($n = 8$), led to more deskilling in the long run. In this sense some forms of 'upskilling' might in practice lead to covert deskilling, in which new skills lead to regular engagement with a series of practically mundane tasks which are ultimately detached from professional roles. In addition, agency workers noted how they were often excluded from training sessions provided by their placement organization. Just as significantly, none of the agency workers had received training directly from their employment agency, which raises the possibility that there may be a skills gap forming between long-term agency workers and their permanent peers in certain areas of practice.

The Other Side of Agency Social Work: Hard Work, Stress and Deskilling

Although the flexibility, experience and available social capital represented important benefits to many agency workers, a significant majority ($n = 20$) complained of being overworked, stressed and deskilled. This complaint related *specifically* to care management and was not as apparent for the few workers who had previously gained access through an agency to voluntary sector posts. Along with a wide range of other accounts of care managers' experiences (Simic, 1995; Dominelli, 1996; Jones, 2001; Postle, 2001, and many more), the agency workers argued that their role was detached from 'real social work'. Indeed it was the case that intense, and often extremely repetitive, bureaucratic

tasks bombarded the worker throughout the day, and movement through a range of labyrinthine procedures epitomized the care management role, as the following (hospital-based) agency care manager points out:

Other [employees] such as the dieticians, occupational or physio-therapists seem to spend much more time on the ward speaking to the patients . . . we spend most of our time stuck in the back office completing contracts, assessments, and all the other forms . . . it's very frustrating.

Such a stance was representative of most of the agency workers, although veteran workers (more than five years qualified) were particularly frustrated with the care management role. Notions of care management (Payne, 1995; Sheppard, 1995; Irving and Gertig, 1998) as representing the 'new social work' was not shared by the agency workers. Indeed more than half ($n = 12$) believed that agency workers were more deskilled than their permanent contracted colleagues. It was explained by one worker that this was usually due to an assumption on the part of their placement supervisor(s) that they must be used as effectively as possible due to their short time spent on work placements. Some workers also felt exploited and lacking in power, particularly in relation to being able to refuse more casework:

Once you start saying 'no' to new cases then the end [of the placement] is always in sight. I've been 'let go' for not accepting more work in the past and I expect it to happen again sometime . . . I'm now looking for a permanent post.

Since temporary workers felt compelled to accept more work this inevitably led to not only work intensification but also a risk that employees would 'struggle on' regardless. This generated risk in relation to work with vulnerable adults and children, a point raised by several of the agency workers. This is particularly significant because much of the work completed by agency workers was in relation to crisis and high-risk scenarios.

Crisis Management

Although social workers have always engaged with crisis-related work in their role, more recent research has highlighted the intensification of such work (Pithouse, 1998; Jones, 2001). For each of the agency workers interviewed, crisis work dominated their role, and indeed many identified themselves as working as part of 'an emergency service' in which they were 'constantly firefighting' (Carey, 2004). Here preventative work was a peripheral or non-existent part of their role, and it was also argued that the provision of support services to vulnerable adults who did not live in high-risk scenarios was rare. Typically crisis work involved responding to issues such as an informal 'carer breakdown'; an accident to a client resulting in physical harm; domestic disputes; or sudden homelessness and so on. Mixed together with the intense paperwork tasks, the usually unpredictable crisis-related work left many workers feeling stressed,

tired and, for some, disillusioned and perplexed. Inevitably some agency workers argued that they struggled to cope within their role, and with limited training and support from employment agencies and work placement settings, some admitted that they were placing clients in jeopardy. Many ($n = 14$) were also hoping to work in another field of social care at some point in the future, most notably the voluntary sector or perhaps by returning to (unqualified) support work.

The crisis work tended to intensify the deskilling process because it inevitably generated more forms and related paperwork to complete. Thus if a service was required urgently for a client a range of forms such as the risk assessment, assessment of need, care plan and so on would need to be completed as quickly as possible. Alongside the organizational emphasis upon bureaucracy and procedure, the prevalence of risk-related forms of agency work meant that for many staff their roles were often intensive and unpredictable.

Limited Time Spent with the Client or Carer

Inevitably the implications of crisis-related work led to other outcomes. Most notable were consequences regarding agency workers' belief that they had limited time to spend with clients and carers. Indeed it was argued that even when such contact was possible, employees found themselves 'usually filling in forms or following other procedures'. Once again this confirms a previous study, which concluded that the 'collection and processing of raw information has . . . become the predominant role of [state] social work' (Carey, 2003: 126). Again this was extremely frustrating for the temporary employees, and again offered another motive for some to find work outside statutory social work.

The transient nature of agency employment tended to generate problems for clients. Agency workers spoke of becoming attached to some clients, or simply more aware of their issues, only to suddenly discover that their contract was no longer required by their employment organization. Most temporary employees believed that their assessments were also completed in a hurry, although most argued that this was also the case for many colleagues working on a permanent contract. Here it was suggested that a 'rushed assessment' generated the risk of inappropriate interventions through the provision of inappropriate services. However, all the agency workers believed that their SSDs were under-resourced, and in general the *non-provision* of a service had now tended to become an established tradition. More experienced workers reminisced about 'helping clients decorate or shop' prior to the advent of care management, but now such 'service provisions' had disappeared. Despite this, it was suggested by some temporary employees ($n = 7$) that some care managers on a permanent contract were allowed more discretion to engage in such roles. This was because (as discussed earlier) agency workers were under significant pressure to 'open and shut' more cases so as to remain in paid employment.

Discussion: The Deskilling/Upskilling of Agency Social Work

The accounts of agency care managers suggest that they have experienced a combination of both re/upskilling and deskilling. Despite this, much of the upskilling within their labour process has *in practice* led to forms of covert deskilling. The use of IT provides a good example. Although new skills are gained by employees with the increasing use of IT to supplement and support the care management role, such skills quickly lead to further engagement with mundane tasks such as constructing care plans, contracts and assessments 'on screen'. For the agency workers, such documents as the assessment were usually completed by hand in the company of the client(s)/carer(s) and then repeated again on their computers back at the social services department. Thus, although new knowledge and skills have been gained, further deskilling and work intensification has emerged through the *duplication* of established procedures. Such a culture also conforms to Braverman's analogy of separating the brain of the manager from the hand of the employee. The assessment/care plan/service review documentation has been designed by local authorities/senior managers/university departments and so on, yet is completed by the hands of the agency workers who have had no influence over the documents before them (Carey, 2004). Braverman was also keen to stress the important use of technology for managers as a device to increase their control of the labour process, and more recently ICT has been identified as an important instrument which extends employee surveillance – sometimes identified as the 'electronic panopticon' (Taylor and Bain, 2003: 1488).

Despite this, agency care managers were keen to stress other formal and informal types of discretion that they enjoyed in their role, particularly their choice of work placements on offer, and the benefits of occupational migration. Such flexibility encouraged a process of upskilling within a work culture that permitted the learning of disparate practice methods and techniques across local authorities and organizations, and through meeting other professionals. Such a potentially rich source of experience suggests that workers can utilize agency work as an occupational strategy which resists some forms of procedure-based deskilling. However, the work intensification experienced once on placement, or the lack of access to local authority or employment agency training, once again contests or nullifies this outcome. The response by some workers was to move on to yet another work placement in the hope that work conditions would improve, and at times this strategy proved successful. Friedman (1977), in his critique of Braverman, highlighted how increasing discretion for workers can be utilized by managers to increase their control by passing 'responsible autonomy' away from themselves. Penn (1983) has also argued that upskilling is an inevitable part of any labour process, particularly during periods when technology changes in the work arena. Such criticism of Braverman has been questioned, however, as he clearly identified the possible impact of employee

resistance to deskilling processes, as well as the uneven nature of any overall deskilling processes between industries (Noon and Blyton, 2002: 156)

For the agency care managers themselves there continued a paradoxical struggle between the forces of re/upskilling and deskilling, and most workers adopted a general strategy of attempting to maximize their fortune and increase the experience of upskilling. The outcome was that many agency workers consciously *navigated* themselves through work placements in the hope of upskilling themselves through the arena of work, an employment strategy that was not available to permanent workers. However, other factors influenced this inequitable approach, with salary, working conditions and family-related commitments influencing whether or not employees were able to opt to work in a particular setting.

In general, all labour process theories accept that control techniques are central to management strategies regardless of workers' location (Taylor and Bain, 2003). From then on, however, the literature and empirical research suggests evidence to both support and reject Braverman's thesis of increasing employee deskilling and managerial control. Knowledge and education, as opposed to 'training', do play important parts in the process of care management, and have led to forms of re/upskilling. Here any argument about the emergence of 'knowledge organizations' or 'knowledge-creating companies' (Littler and Innes, 2003: 75) within the era of 'knowledge capitalism' has relevance for social work, both in relation to its education and practice fields. This outcome also potentially undermines the very foundation of Braverman's assumption of perpetual deskilling within the workplace. However, the knowledge capitalism paradigm can itself be contested in relation to social work and the development of care/case management. For example, the NVQization of social work education – in which competency-based training dominates, time spent 'training' on placement continues to increase, and critical theories are removed from the curriculum (Jones, 1999) – suggests that as with technology new knowledge can also further deskill the employee.

Despite their flexibility and the experience gained, the majority of agency care managers *believed* that they were deskilled in their role; predominately this was due to the excessive bureaucracy, work intensification and increased responsibility entailed in the culture of agency care management. As suggested earlier, much of the increased knowledge and many of the business/IT skills gained by employees were identified as providing an additional burden to already established responsibilities, a finding supported by other research (notably Postle, 2001 and Jones, 2001). In addition, the prevailing and now dominant cultures of managerialism and consumerism (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Harris, 2002) were recognized by some as not being related to employees' interpretation of what 'social work' constitutes (in their interpretation of the notoriously nebulous concept). This is despite the fact that any business culture is now very much a central part of the social work role (Holman, 1993; Harris, 2002), and ironically the expansion of agency work represents an important

extension of the role of the private sector within social work. The anxiety felt by employees was not generally placed into a political context which reflects wider debates within academic spheres. Bauman (1998) has highlighted the impact of structural factors on the creation of the 'individualized society'. Here mass consumerism, reduced employment opportunities and increased expectations on workers, alongside other dynamics such as rising inequalities of income and opportunity, lead to an increasing sense of anxiety forming amongst individuals. Despite this, Bauman argues that most of us are unable to link wider structural factors to any personal sense of despair, resulting in further anxiety and alienation. For the agency workers, limited recognition was offered of the source from which their regularly expressed frustrations originated, and indeed, as with my research into the views of care managers generally, some of the explanations offered for feelings of anxiety at work were varied and often random (Carey, 2004).

Any increasing reliance on transient staff has many implications for social work, not least the position of clients. For agency care managers in particular there was an established culture of 'client processing' – indeed a couple of workers likened their roles to that of factory workers, particularly regarding the pressures to assess/review and close cases as quickly as possible. Here a strong parallel exists with Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis (1993), in which 'the principles of bureaucracy and the assembly line' meet (Watson, 2003: 72). In this scenario it might be argued that a process of objectification or commodification of the 'processed' client has emerged (or become extended), first established through the care management process, and then further extended by the expansion of the agency worker. This all adds further support to Braverman's thesis. Agency care managers identified *speed* as a key to success on a work placement. The faster a worker dealt with each case the more likely it was that they would have a contract extended, regardless of any consequences for the *quality* of work provided. Such a processing culture raises important concerns about any over-reliance upon agency workers. Although of benefit to organizations in the short term (in, say, helping to alleviate a recruitment crisis), they inevitably go on to create potential risks, not merely to social work but also to other recruiting welfare institutions such as education and health services. 'Processing' people inevitably risks poor assessments and inappropriate interventions, and agency recruitment provides a further drain on scarce resources that could be spent on increasingly limited (and typically risk-centred) or non-existent services.

The expansion of agency work has occurred alongside many other sweeping changes within social work, particularly those linked to marketization and other neo-liberal reforms (Leonard, 1997). They have included rationalization, downsizing, privatization and contracting out: ongoing reforms which are now referred to in the New Labour vernacular as forms of 'modernization' (Bains, 2004: 6). For the few veteran agency workers such outcomes had added further concerns about not having control over services provided by other agencies or

the lack of any real, tangible support to client groups. One worker talked about the 'faceless providers on the other end of the phone' and another talked of 'feeling powerless' and 'chained to the desk'. Such a lack of control over service provision, and the various forms of deskilling and disempowerment experienced, add further weight to a re-evaluation of Braverman's thesis via the experience of state and agency social work. However, Burawoy's recognition of employee conformity to managerial agendas in a range of employment arenas (1979) still offers important questions. Despite regular complaints, there was limited evidence of tangible group resistance by employees to poor working conditions, strict eligibility criteria or the typically poor services provided to clients.

What seems likely, however, is that, if the ongoing expansion of the private sector continues in the social care sector and social work, proletarianization is likely to intensify in social work. Despite this, there was not enough evidence in this research to justify referring to agency care managers as 'white-collar proletariats', and certainly not in the context of Crompton and Jones's depiction of the experiences of female administrative workers (1984). Although numerous forms of proletarianization were apparent for temporary employees, they were at times compensated for by ongoing labour processes which contained proletarianization. For example, agency workers were usually able to secure a moderate to high salary from their employment agency, and with staff shortages in social work at the time of the research continuing to increase, most workers were content with their agreed salaries. In addition, and as previously explored, a degree of discretion was permitted for workers in consultation with placement team managers. Such forms of formal and informal privilege or discretion provided an antidote to, or a source of respite from, the sometimes debilitating impact of 'on the job' anxiety generated. In relation to employee identity, there were also positive aspects discovered in employees perceiving themselves as 'professionals' with altruistic intentions and purpose. Such an outlook, however contested, stimulated self-confidence and motivated many temporary staff, which again helped contain and, for a few, even overcome the shared sense of proletarianization.

In this context, the agency care manager stood in the paradoxical position of fusing together both the optimism and pessimism apparent in post-war paradigms that have attempted to clarify trends in the world of work. There was evidence of upskilling, flexibility, discretion, and the use of new knowledge by employees, as epitomized by the optimism of the 1950s and much of the 1990s. However, there was also evidence of the deskilling and proletarianization of temporary employees, as was evident and influential in the late 1960s, and highlighted by radical social workers during the 1970s and early 1980s. Despite this, veteran practitioners, through the delivery of detailed and often emotional narratives, argued that deskilling had intensified *throughout* their extensive period of practice, particularly since the establishment of care/case management. Bearing this in mind, it is likely that the proletarianization of social work

will continue to intensify in the future, particularly if marketization continues to expand, as has been the case under New Labour's 'third way' brand of neo-liberalism. Any quasi-professional status gained by an occupation in the labour market is never guaranteed, but remains dependent upon resisting regular forces of deskilling and managerial control, as identified by Braverman.

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Note

1. 'Agency' refers to independent recruitment firms that amongst other roles recruit and supply qualified social workers to a range of organizations, most commonly local authority, public or government sector social service departments. 'Care managers' refers to qualified social workers working in the state sector who specialize in work with adult clients (most commonly older and disabled people).

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