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Work Employment Society 2004; 18; 459
DOI: 10.1177/0950017004045546

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<http://wes.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/18/3/459>

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'Just a temp?' Women, temporary employment and lifestyle

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ABSTRACT

Women's continued high rate of participation in non-standard employment, especially temporary and part-time jobs, attracts much critical concern. Many social analysts of work regard non-standard employment as heightening risks of economic insecurity, workplace exploitation and social marginalization. Labour economists regard temporary and part-time work as comprising 'secondary' labour markets and workers in this sector as 'secondary earners'. Many analysts consider women's over-representation in this sector to be a consequence of women's exclusion from primary sector employment and its expected better conditions.

This article develops an interpretive analysis of a qualitative study of 45 women temporary workers in New Zealand in 2001–2002. The experiences and aspirations with respect to work of this particular sample of women currently engaged in temporary employment relations indicate some divergent trajectories from those more commonly observed. In contrast to most current depictions of women and temporary employment, the findings indicate that some women are striving to practise their own preferential employment arrangements in ways that actively challenge conventional economic assumptions of employment behaviour and traditional trajectories of women's lives. The article proposes that these efforts may indicate alternative oppositional strategies to normative acceptance of qualitatively degraded jobs and employment relations.

KEY WORDS

changing work relationships / individualism / subjectivation / women and work

Introduction

The increased participation of women in the labour market and in diverse occupations in advanced economies through the latter half of the 20th century has been well documented (Castells, 1996; Pahl, 1988; Rubery et al., 1999; Wigfield, 2001). Women's increased participation in paid employment has brought immense and important gains toward greater equality between women and men in the workplace, and in other spheres of social life. Yet, despite legislative efforts toward equal pay and equal opportunities for women and men in many OECD countries, obstacles to women's further participation and advancement to the highest levels in the world of paid work remain issues of considerable attention and debate especially among feminist analysts of work. To date much emphasis has been placed on economic disparities between men and women – disparities that remain significant in the advanced Western economies as in other parts of the world – and on women's disproportionate absence from upper echelons of organizational management and professional rank. For many analysts, heightened effort toward women's equal participation and opportunity in paid work is the principal means of redress of both economic and political power disparities between women and men in the workplace and in society (Lindley, 1994; Purcell, 2000; Rubery, 1998).

Yet, notwithstanding the importance of these efforts toward greater equality between women and men, the pursuit of women's equality in work and employment have conventionally required the acceptance of terms of equality and full participation that have been pre-established by and for industrialized male employers and workers. The wide acceptance, in economic and sociological analyses of work, of the normalization of a particular type of employment relation and occupational commitment once characteristic of male industrial workers throughout the heyday of the 40-plus-hour week in industrial societal organization continues to underpin the standard by which men's and, more recently, women's employment participation is measured. The normative acceptance of these industrial economic assumptions and the continued demands for male-normed work have led to a prevailing emphasis on women's irregular patterns of employment as inherently problematic and unequal. Particularly significant is the persistent motif in patterns of women's employment of high rates of participation in temporary and intermittent employment as well as part-time employment, which are typically equated with poorer jobs (in economic terms) and lack of workplace success. It is, moreover, widely assumed that women's patterns of employment which contribute to their economic inequalities with respect to men similarly exacerbate patterns of women's over-representation in lower-skilled or lower-status occupations, their restriction to familial and domestic work, and their lack of political and cultural participation in society more broadly (Bradley et al., 2000; Heery and Salmon, 2000; Purcell, 2000; Rubery et al., 1999).

There has been, and remains, eminently good reason for analysts' concern over women's economic and political inequalities, and there are strong grounds

in modern industrial society for the assumption that such disparities are the definitive issue at stake. Yet the considerable changes occurring in the world of work (Beck, 2000; Castells, 1996; Harvey, 1989; Rifkin, 1996) are generating, and indeed co-constituent of, altering relationships and attitudes to conventional work participation and roles. In addition, currents of individualism and self-expressivism (Beck, 1992; Casey, 2002a; Castells, 1997; Giddens, 1991) generate new cultural and political demands that are not confined to the economic. These trends affect a complex social ensemble of competing currents, in which one influential course forges a trajectory of economic liberalization and strategic management. Contemporary strategic management in a deregulated environment encourages employer-initiated contingency and flexibility in organizational practices and labour markets. A consequence is a rapid rise of 'non-standard' or 'atypical'¹ forms of work in many occupations and industries. Although women continue to be much more likely than men to participate in non-standard, especially temporary work (Rubery et al., 1999) an expectation that non-standard forms of work are involuntarily undertaken or inherently disadvantageous to workers may no longer be readily assumed (Casey, 2002b). In addition to the many reasons for analysts' concern over the differential and marginal experiences of non-standard workers, especially temporary women workers – concerns which are discussed below – there is some evidence of contrary, unexpectedly favourable, experiences and opportunities. It is important to note, however, that the favourable aspects of these developments arise out of a heightening of socio-cultural values somewhat privileged over economic imperatives. That is, for some persons, efforts to alter relations to conventional marketized work appear to be motivated by alternative value aspirations around notions of quality of life – including quality of work – in which non-economic qualities are emphasized.

Our research into women's engagement with non-standard forms of labour market work, especially temporary employment, indicates that for some women – and by no means rich or dependent women – temporary employment is undertaken by preference and insistence. Moreover, and importantly, we suggest that this preference is by no means dictated by conventional expectations (e.g. Hakim, 1995, 2000) of women's primary commitment to and self-identity locus in family and domestic work, or their conformity to 'secondary earning' status. On the contrary, it appears that some women are striving to practise their own self-styled, preferential arrangements in which conventional economic assumptions of employment behaviour *and* traditional trajectories of women's lives are actively challenged. The privileging of the economic as the ultimate rationality of work is repositioned in favour of subjective well-being and quality of life in cultural terms.

In contribution to a widening of the debates on women and atypical work this article offers an analytical discussion of our research findings among a sample of women working in temporary, predominantly clerical, jobs. We first review the debates on women and temporary employment.

Women and temporary employment

There is growing debate over the rise of various forms of non-standard or atypical work and a considerable literature addresses the rise of so-called secondary sector jobs and contingent employment (Beck, 2000; Heery and Salmon, 2000; Rifkin, 1996; Ritzer, 1996). Women's greatly increased participation in paid work in the latter half of the 20th century has brought considerable benefits. Feminist analysts from the 1970s through the 1990s have by and large assumed that the dramatic increase in women's participation in the paid workforce concomitantly indicates an advancement in gender equality through women's adoption of male-normed industrial work (work once-predicated on non-wage working women's domestic and relational labour). Women's exclusion from those male-normed patterns and their organizational and professional advancement are for many, the crucial problem of women's contemporary work (Bradley et al., 2000, Heery and Salmon, 2000; Rubery et al., 1999). An extensive literature addresses the problems of both women's exclusion from such participation, and their 'double burden' of domestic and relational work in addition to wage work. Men's disinclination to pursue equality with women in unpaid domestic and relational work has affected high rates of women's participation in the labour market in the form of temporary or part-time jobs.

Many feminist analysts continue to share the mainstream economic categorizations of the labour market and of economic activity in modern industrial society. Many retain the use of models of a dual-sector labour market structure comprising primary and secondary sectors. A primary labour market provides continuous, secure jobs with an organizational employer with varying degrees of career advancement structures and employment benefits. Jobs in this sector, which have typically been held by men, are counted as 'breadwinner' jobs. Labour contracts of this nature are regarded as a fundamental basis of social cohesion and participation in Western societies. Secondary labour markets contain jobs that involve short-term employment contracts, often with low pay, or part-time or casual work. Secondary sector jobs have commonly been performed by women, whom economists define as 'secondary earners' and whose breadwinner husbands primarily support the household economy. Furthermore, secondary sector jobs are often performed by socially marginal persons requiring two or more such jobs to make a living.

Economists tend to designate persons who are not currently participating in the labour market as 'inactive'. Many feminists have implicitly accepted this categorization and regarded women who are engaged (only) in traditional family care work as inactive. Many feminists have assumed that if a woman is not fully employed in labour market work she is 'steered toward a domestic fate' (Bradley et al., 2000: 81).² Like Proctor and Padfield (1998: 249), they assume that women have often 'opted for motherhood because of limited labour market opportunity'. Many assume that participation in paid work is not only the major indicator of women's advancing economic equality with men, but that it is concomitantly the singular path to full socio-cultural participation. Some

researchers, for example Hakim (1995), regard women's continued participation in non-standard work, tied to high employment turnover, as an indication of their 'weak commitment' to the labour market. Hakim has been severely criticized in feminist commentaries since it is argued that she upholds traditionalist gender discourses (Hakim, 1995, 2000). But many feminists continue to pose women's choices, at best, as only between family work and labour market work, with the definitively preferred option being to 'catch up' with men (e.g. Bradley et al., 2000) in the world of paid work.

An acceptance of conventional masculinized institutions of economy and work has shaped the prevailing discourses on women's engagement in temporary or part-time work. There is no doubt that women's accomplishments in demanding and gaining entry into labour market employment and their acceptance of employment relations once typically reserved for men have secured many of the advantages and satisfactions of 'standard work' and improved their economic position. But their participation has subjected them to the same assumptions of a prevailing industrial discourse which positions persons engaged in part-time or temporary work as 'lesser' workers than continuously employed full-time workers. Researchers express concern over their supposed inherent inequalities: '[P]olarisation may emerge around those women in full-time and those in part-time work, with the latter trapped in less skilled and "dead-end" jobs' (Rubery et al., 1999: 306). Furthermore, many take the view that: '[e]mployees who are both part-time and temporary face the double disadvantage of a limited contract and limited hours of work' (Rubery et al., 1999: 279).

This normative discourse has largely gained strength in the face of contemporary organizational strategies expanding contingency, intermittency, flexibility and diverse non-standard employment practices increasingly observable in OECD countries. To date, much of the extant research on women temporary employees has been conducted on women working in temporary clerical or administrative assignments. Feminist inquiries into temporary office work have generally treated this form of work as a category of traditional women's work. Women working temporarily in various office roles are now so commonplace that the informal designation of 'temping' to describe this type of work has become part of industrial vernacular. An extensive literature of the 1980s and 1990s has addressed and highlighted a range of problems associated with temporary office work. Many studies point to temporary workers' increased vulnerability to economic insecurity and low-status jobs. Some researchers report that workers in temporary jobs and in discontinuous employment relations would prefer to be in regular, continuous, secure employment situations (Felstead and Jewson, 1999; Nolen, 1996; Rogers, 1995). They argue that temporary workers are usually paid less than continuous workers employed by, or contractually assigned to, the same company and have reduced entitlements to a range of employee benefits such as paid holidays, superannuation schemes, or health insurance (Garsten, 1999; Nolen, 1996). Other literature also points out that many temporary workers, because of their high turnover and lack of

integration into the employing organization or a trade union, may be subject to reduced protection by labour legislation and union membership (Appelbaum, 1992; DuRivage, 1992; Felstead and Jewson, 1999; Vosko, 2000). It is argued that temporary employees have little or no control over workplace decisions or over the design and implementation of their work tasks. These 'disposable workers', as Rosenberg and Lapidus (1999) term them, are often subject to pejorative assumptions that temporary workers are deficient or incompetent, and are given the least desirable tasks. Such workers can experience increased stress through the anxiety of substitutability and adaptability (Garsten, 1999) and extended employer control over the labour process (Burgess and Strachan, 1999). There are reports that temporary workers are isolated or marginalized by continuously employed workers in their workplaces and perceived as undermining permanent workers' conditions and pay.

For these reasons an expectation among many researchers of intensified exploitation and marginalization of temporary women workers remains widely held. In addition, there is much evidence for the expansion of 'McJobs' (Ritzer, 1996) and heightened managerial control of many work forces – both continuous and temporary – for instance in call centres, which exacerbates work degradation. However, continuing to assume, as most analysts do, that temporary jobs are more degraded and undesirable than permanent jobs, which are similarly increasingly subject to intensified rationalization and control (Casey, 2002a; Castells, 1996; Strath, 2000; Széll, 2001) and that temporary workers aspire to standard employment relations across industries may be unfounded. Intensification of heteronomous work design and control in many industries may render these jobs, even on permanent employment contracts, no more 'superior' than temporary jobs. The normative privileging of the economic imperative among workers as well as employers underlies the ready dismissal of propositions that non-standard, especially temporary and intermittent, work may offer viable options for workers. Rejecting these suggestions as neo-liberal rhetoric, Bradley et al., for instance, claim: 'The ability to opt for less employment or to pick and choose when and how to work is a luxury available to the relatively powerful and wealthy' (Bradley et al., 2000: 169).

Nonetheless, there is much evidence for continuing concern over unequal and disadvantaged experiences of women in temporary employment (Rubery et al., 1999). The following discussion in no way seeks to undermine or disclaim either these concerns or the immensely important accomplishments that greater participation in the institutions of labour market work have brought to women's fuller socio-cultural participation. Indeed, we share those recognitions. However, the authors' first-hand experiences and observations of industrial employment and witnessing of the demise of generations of workers' movements' efforts to widen the sphere of freedom and democratization within work, prompted our interrogation of assumptions that privilege conventional work as always and necessarily superior and preferred, especially under contemporary conditions of intensified heteronomous control. Our research, informed by a critical orientation, has brought to light evidence of women

engaging in temporary and intermittent employment for reasons which many find superior to participation in conventional permanent jobs. Our research leads us to consider that further advancements in women's experiences of and relations toward work and employment may be emerging in unexpected ways. These developments may herald demands beyond those of equality with men on conventionally established industrial terms, and pose emancipatory alternatives toward more enriched lives for both women and men.

Some disparate experiences

The following discussion draws on qualitative research we conducted in New Zealand cities in 2001 and 2002. The data, although gathered in New Zealand, is analysed and interpreted in a manner that, we propose, draws attention to practices of and relations to work in advanced modern societies more generally. However, pertinent details of the New Zealand³ context are included and where appropriate highlighted for their particularity. The authors⁴ conducted in-depth interviews of a sample of 45 women⁵ currently working in temporary jobs. The subjects were drawn through a variety of personal contacts, word-of-mouth referrals and through recruitment agencies. The participants represent a broad range of age, socio-cultural and ethnic backgrounds, of living arrangements, and of temping experiences. The women's ages range from 21 to 64 years, their living arrangements include marriage or de facto partnerships with and without children, elder or other dependents, single households, solo parent households, shared flatting, and living in parental households.⁶ All of the women possessed secondary school qualifications or polytechnic qualifications. Some held university or professional qualifications including one with a commercial pilot's licence. Their experiences of temping ranged from one to sixteen years with a large majority (88%) having international temping experience. At the time of data collection most of the women were performing clerical, receptionist, secretarial, administrative, accounts or data entry roles. Others included in their repertoire of temporary jobs bank telling, airline ticketing, medical management, call centre work, research assistance, childcare, stocktaking, packing and labouring.

Most of the sample were currently, or previously, registered with an agency but others choose to find jobs when they want them without using an agency and by drawing on contacts with previous employers or other networks. It is important to note that in New Zealand 'registering' with an agency means being on their books for possible placement with the agency's clients in a temporary role. The temporary worker is not employed and does not receive pay of any kind. When she takes up an assignment she becomes the employee of the client company and the agency collects a fee deducted from the employee's hourly rate. A person may register with one or several agencies in order to increase chances or widen choices of assignment.

The interview questions⁷ sought data on reasons for temping, experiences of temping work, orientations to work and employment, income management, and work-life preferences. During the period in which the research was conducted the unemployment rate in New Zealand was 5.4 to 6.4 percent (seasonally adjusted), with labour market participation rates of 73.7 percent for men and 57.9 percent for women (Department of Statistics, Commentary, March 2001).

The following discussion of the data is organized according to analytical themes and utilizes illustrative extractions rather than ideally fully contextualized narratives from respondents. Necessarily constrained by space we nonetheless try to give a picture of selected respondents' relations to temporary employment relations within the thematic clusters, and draw our interpretative analysis from that.

Reasons for temping

The women reported a variety of factors that had led to their taking temporary jobs. These include being in a transitional period (self-defined) of life, such as returning from a long period of overseas travel, being made redundant from a permanent job, own business failing, or experiencing uncertainty in personal relationships. Other reasons included clear requirements for work with flexible arrangements in order to give priority to family life commitments or other interests and pursuits such as sport, political or community activism, voluntary work, cultural and educational interests, and non-work pleasure and recreational activities. A third set of reasons for temping were efforts to accommodate expressed dissatisfaction with conventional permanent and or full-time positions.

I took voluntary redundancy from the dairy company, and there aren't many marketing roles around for someone with my experience. So while I was looking for a marketing role I thought I'd do temping. (Abby, late 30s, living with partner, temping for nearly two years)

Abby adds that, 'it suits me right now...the flexibility...no stress.... And it's also a chance for something else to come along.'

For respondent Lucy, who is aged 30 and lives with her son and friend, the reasons for temping were prompted by a reevaluation of her work roles and aspirations: '...I'm going through a non-committal phase at the moment.... I don't want to go into permanent work. I do plan to look for a permanent job. But I plan to be really fussy about it.... If I'm still temping in a year, well, that's OK.' She commented that some of her experiences with permanent work were less than satisfactory and she wanted to avoid getting into disagreeable permanent jobs with their incumbent expectations and commitments.

Another respondent, Gill, also aged 30 and living in a single household, reports that she has been temping for about two years: 'I got into temping...we decided to let our business go. It wasn't making any money, and I didn't want

to commit to building the business at this point ... plan to pick it up again in about ten years.' Gill reports that, after she and her business partner wound up the business, taking up temporary clerical/secretarial work enabled a time of reevaluation and much more room for other non-work activities in her life.

For many of the respondents, the choice to temp was a reflection of other aspects of life taking precedence over the pursuit of a conventional full-time, company-based work career.

Rebecca, in her mid-30s and married with one child, reports that temporary employment fits into her life:

Temping is really convenient. [When] other things are happening, other things that take time and I need to commit to those things, it's nice to know that...when [husband's] parents came out from England to visit, I could take time off work. [As a temp] I feel more relaxed about umm...the sense of obligation you feel to your employer, because you know, at the end of the day, permanent or temporary, I think your family is just far more a priority. Temping just makes it easier to feel that.

But these 'other life priorities' prevailing over paid work career decisions were of a diverse nature. Significantly, childcare or other family responsibilities, the expected constraint on women's standard workforce participation, was cited by only a small minority of the respondents. The choice to temp for the majority of this sample was motivated by desires to pursue other interests in their lives – from education and better job prospects, to voluntary community and service work, international travel, and simply to 'do what I'd rather be doing'.

Christie, in her mid 40s, lives in her own home for which she is paying the mortgage. She has been temping for over ten years. She reports: 'I'm temping mainly because of the voluntary work I do.... I'm involved nationally for the National Council of Women and on a couple of other national-level committees, youth affairs and so on.... These are very important involvements for me'. She reports that she has held assignments ranging from a few weeks to 18 months, and she arranges her jobs to accommodate her travel, meetings and committee projects.

Similarly, Meryl, who is in her early 40s and shares her home and living expenses with her mother, reports many years of temping 'on and off'. She currently takes assignments as she needs them in order to pursue her unpaid work activities:

When I was standing [for election] for the Community Board, I just got so involved, and like so much time... and then now that I'm [elected] on, there's so many really good projects. I like it, it's what I like doing. So I'm only working kind of like a few weeks here and there.

A younger respondent, Navindra, who is aged 24 and lives in her parental family home reports:

I like to travel a lot, usually about two months every year. Temping is really good because it allows me to save for the trip.... I like temping and I know that full-time

employment just wasn't for me. I couldn't just sit in an office from nine to five. I need more hours in the day to do my own things.

While expressions of satisfaction ranged from 'I really love it!' to 'I just take the money and run and try not to whine too much', all of the respondents expressed an appreciation of the freedom and flexibility in their relations to paid work enabled by temporary work assignments. A considerable majority (91%) spoke of the high value they placed on flexibility in their work – a flexibility in respect to aspects such as when (e.g. full or part-time hours, duration of assignment, season of year) and where (particular city areas or sites) they worked, for and with whom, and on type of work project. Flexibility, and non-commitment, is expressed across the age range in the data sample. Respondent Tammy, aged 23 and living in her family home, illustrates what many of the younger women reported:

I don't like to stay in one place for too long ... temping means that you can work for a week and then you can have a break, or you can do whatever you want to.... It's really flexible, and like, I'd say (to the agency) that I want Monday and Tuesday off, have you got any assignments starting on Wednesday?

For another respondent, Susan (39, single household):

There's a lot of freedom in temping to just up and go, you know. Because as a temp, to a degree you are your own boss. I mean you ... can state when you want to work and when you don't want to work. Would I go back permanent?... No, I don't think so. Even if I were to go onto any sort of permanent role it would be on a contract type situation ...'

They also reported the value of not working, of being able to have, as Christie reports, 'a four or six week holiday whenever you want to, as well as being able to take days off here and there ... this is more difficult in full-time employment'; or of simply having more control over their day:

I think times are changing and people are moving into the temping thing and they're realizing that a lot of their day goes into working...and I've met so many people that say, 'oh, I don't want to go to work today' and me, you know, I get up and think 'oh cool, another day of work, for a few hours'... (Navindra)

A third cluster of reasons for continuing participation in temping was expressed dissatisfaction with experiences of permanent roles. Many report that they choose to temp as an escape from the 'stresses and abuses', and the 'politics' often experienced in permanent employment roles in organizational workplaces. Some reported their wish to avoid the responsibilities and commitments and management practices incumbent in permanent positions. Others reported their wish to alleviate the boredom of routine clerical jobs and their disaffection with conventional jobs by opting for variety and discontinuity with different employing organizations.

On the odd occasion I've taken on full-time roles, but I just find that with full-time you get involved with politics in some way, and I think you get more abused as a

full-time member of staff.... When I went permanent, I was so stressed out in that job ... because of all the ridiculous hours I was working...that I ended up with [a skin ailment], whereas as a temp, you say, oh, I'm outta here, and you walk out and you forget about it. (Susan)

Laila (42, shared living), who has been temping for three years, expresses her disdain more directly: 'I just think, "I'm a temp. I'm just here to do this job, and that's what I'm focusing on.... Please don't involve me in anything else. I shouldn't be drawn into office politics.... Don't drag me into your bullshit".'

Similarly Beth, who has been temping for several years, reports dissatisfaction with various managerial practices and 'constant' organizational restructuring, and the pressures put on permanent staff to perform to others' directions and changing demands:

We [temps] are lucky because we can choose. And we don't get taken into a room every two or three weeks and asked what we've done, and how many products we've sold and get ticked off.... We don't have to do that. (Beth, 58, couple household)

Two additional comments further illustrate this point:

Since I've been temping my stress levels have gone down a lot from when I had a permanent job...you just don't have to get involved...when you leave at the end of the day, that's it! Even on long-term assignments you can still retain that distance of mind. (Linda, 39, single household).

I like the fact that I can ring up (the agency) and say 'look, this job is awful...horrible. I don't want to go back there'. And they can't make you. And that's what I love about temping ... instead of staying in a horrible job, just stuck there because you're on permanent. (Rose, 32, couple household)

Experiences and competencies

As illustrated above, for some respondents the reasons for initially taking up temping roles⁸ came out of uncertainty about commitment to a particular job or employers or because taking temporary assignments just seemed easier. For others it was to ensure that other valued aspects of life activities were accommodated and facilitated – from family work, to community work, to (so-called) leisure activities. Reasons for continuing to engage in temporary employment illustrated a convergence toward preference. A strong majority (89%) of respondents reported a positive experience of temping for its facilitation of other life priorities, e.g. relational involvements (family or community work) and personal well-being, and their ability to manage its negative aspects, such as employer-initiated terminations and unpredictability. This two-fold aspect featured as the primary reason for continued temporary engagements. Many respondents reported that taking up temporary work in preference to permanent roles was accompanied by a shift in the way they felt about their work. They reported that the flexibility and non-commitment to an employer beyond

the term of the contract enable positive psychological features in their sense of control, distance, and self-directedness. Being a temp, in the first instance, enabled a psychological distance from the performance of their skilled work and the employing or client organization, noted in particular in the ability to 'forget about work' when they are not there:

When you're a temp, there's always that threat that if you're a good temp, you can just turn around and walk away. And I think people tend to value that, you know, they sort of respect you a bit more. I tend to get more respect as a temp for my abilities. (Susan)

It suits me to go into a role, give it my best, and then leave. I don't want to be tied down to anything. I enjoy having the time off when I want it instead of being dictated to as you are in a permanent job. (Rose)

It matters to me to be able to decide when I want to work or not. When I was with XY [a magazine publisher and a permanent position] I was always running on someone else's time, like it was always someone else's deadline, and it was never my time or, like the way I want to pace my work.... I had to rush around doing stuff for others, and putting up with their stresses and dramas, and you know, like you've got no real say. (Meryl)

Others report similarly that: 'it's nice to know that I can walk out anytime...', or that 'if you're in a role that you're not really enjoying, you have the opportunity to change.' While some also reported that it is sometimes difficult to take leave during assignments because clients (of the recruitment agency) often assume the temp will work uninterrupted for the duration of the project, the temp's ability to end the assignment could be, and had been, invoked if satisfactory accommodation between client employer and temp was not reached.

These reports of welcome psychological distance from the employing organization or the job itself contrast with reports of increased anxiety through marginality and substitutability (e.g. Garsten, 1999). A further contrast is illustrated in the reports of many respondents of a degree of pride in the ability to pick up tasks quickly, of relative psychological independence, and in the particular competencies of office temps. Respondents reported that temporary roles, irrespective of length and type of assignment, involve more than the performance of a range of office duties for which each woman had qualifications and experiential expertise. The temping role also requires the person to be able to move easily between different assignments and different locations, adapting to various office systems and organizational cultures. The temp has to 'hit the ground running' in order to perform her assigned tasks, get along with co-workers and negotiate particular organizational irrationalities. The women considered these capabilities as vital skills in the performance of their work. They expressed an element of occupational pride in these abilities, which they claim are often not found among regular organizational employees in the same kinds of jobs. Some asserted that the temp has to be 'better than the average office person'.

I can walk into a new place ... no worries about meeting new people or learning new processes at all ... lay it on. I can totally handle it! (Lucy)

I've been thrown into roles that I've never ever had anything to do with before... and ended up doing them really well...and the boss goes and offers me a permanent role...but I haven't wanted to [accept] ... (Susan)

Many of the women 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. Most reported a preference, which they often succeeded in achieving, for a variety of assignment lengths and types in order to have times of relative security of tenure and income, periods of quick change, and periods of not working according to their preferences at any time.

All of the respondents reported having declined some assignments for their own personal preferences. Some report that they seek assignments that provide them with more challenge than regular company jobs. 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'. In many cases, respondents reported that they were not given the worst jobs in the organization, as has often been the case in the past, and some report having worse jobs in permanent positions.

When I first started temping a temp was 'she's just a temp' and that's how people looked at it. If anything goes wrong in any organization it's always blamed on 'the temp'.... That was years ago. I think today because temps are so common, it's not so much ... you're brought in as a person and treated like a person. (Susan)

As well as choosing to decline or quit boring jobs, many reported that their efforts to seek more satisfying assignments enabled them to gain more skills, breadth of experience and self-confidence in temping positions than permanent positions may offer.

Christie, who has worked for more than ten years as a temp, reports:

I feel I have been given ... challenges and had to work with people at all levels, including staff training ... advising ... and that type of thing.... It has given me a lot more experience and the company has been able to say, 'regardless of you being a temp, we respect who you are, what you are and what you've given us'.

Tanja says:

I think [you] need to be outgoing and willing to take on anything, but also quite strong. You can be pushed around, and I think that's a good thing too. I've got stronger as a temp.... No matter who it is, if I disagree with someone I will [say so] but in a nice manner.

Tanja (aged 25 and living in a shared flat) adds that being 'nice but not soft' has enabled her to maintain a psychological distance and self-confidence. These features, respondents reported, also enabled them to accept the contingencies of temping work that may unevenly suit them and their employers.

Security and precariousness

The temp's preference for serial discontinuity over continuous work with one employer carries higher risk of periods without employment and entails careful income management. Many spoke of the challenges and trade-offs involved in maintaining a degree of security of income while working in known conditions of uncertain job tenure, periods without paid work, and their preferences for self-initiated time-off. For all of the respondents, whether living alone or with others, the problem of maintaining sufficient security of income – with the degree of sufficiency determined by each person – while simultaneously taking advantage of the benefits of temporary employment is a crucial aspect of the worker's self-management of temporary and intermittent employment.

I think with temping ... it's the unknown of the money situation and the availability of assignments that is always the big question mark that hangs over your head. But other than that, it fits in with my life really well.... It means I can do all the other things I want. (Trina, 27, single household)

Navindra reports that she carefully manages her finances and chooses to live frugally in order to 'have lots of my own time' and to travel:

I have things I need to do for myself and I make that my priority rather than going to work because I know I've got enough income to support whatever I need to do.... When I'm not working I reduce my needs.... I told the agency when I registered that I only wanted part-time work and that I would need to take time off for other things.... I've had no problems from the agency in taking time off...

She adds that her workmates holding continuous positions:

...get jealous...they want to know what I do for the rest of the time. I just tell them I ... do my own thing and then come into work and they're, like, 'sigh'. They have the choice but because they tell themselves that they need to work X many hours for this X days to make X much income. They've tied themselves to that!

Navindra's 'other things' included volunteer youth work, long morning coffee outings with her friends, and 'just hanging out'.

A story from another respondent illustrates a further dimension of the preference to take temporary employment and the need to manage inherent economic uncertainties. Penny (aged 36 and living in an extended family household) reports that she likes to design and make craft objects and to travel to fairs and craft markets to sell her work. She says:

Quite frankly, I think that as long as you can sustain a certain amount of income, I'd rather have work that is interesting. If a job's boring, then I do my creative work at home. So if I get to a point that I think 'god, I can't go in there [employment place] tomorrow', then I do art or pottery at home ... it lets you be creative because you're obviously not being creative at [paid] work.

The priority placed on income management, rather than security of a particular job, depends on a number of factors specific to each person. The vast majority of the sample, especially those who have been temping for several years,

expressed confidence in their skills and abilities to gain sufficiently regular assignments according to their preferences for employment. They acknowledge a degree of uncertainty is inherent in temporary work but it does not necessarily equate to feelings of insecurity or marginality. Uncertainty is part of the job, but is considered a manageable uncertainty and of less importance than 'feeling better in myself' or for 'more pleasure'.

To me a job is something you should enjoy and preferably get some money for that sustains what you need.... I do the things, like make jewellery for people who haven't got very much money... that brings me a lot more pleasure. (Penny, sells her jewellery at local markets in poorer neighbourhoods)

The majority of women temporary workers in this sample assert a willingness to live with a higher degree of uncertainty and risk with respect to income than that generally expected of permanent positions. For most, the necessities of life include more than financial income. As Navindra, Meryl and Susan, for example, conclude:

There's more to life, you know?

I need income to survive and that's basically it.... My focus is more on voluntary work rather than work that generates income.

My life's my life ... work's not my priority.

I need jobs for income to support what I want to do ... and I want to do what I'd rather be doing ...

Only two of the respondents in this sample of temporary or intermittent workers considered themselves to be 'well-off' or having high economic security. Both were in long-term marriage relationships. A number were very highly confident, and most were fairly confident, of their continued ability to find work when they wanted it. But none of them expressed a concern with social or personal precariousness or marginality. They appeared to distinguish income uncertainty from personal and social precariousness. Rather, their stated efforts to pursue life activities in which they are active and effective in various non-paid work domains diminish risk of personal and social precariousness. One respondent, Christie, emailed the researchers after completion of the data collection.

I was interviewed by you earlier this year. Since then I have been awarded an MNZM (Member of New Zealand Order of Merit) for services to the community.... Working as a temp has certainly contributed to my receiving this award. Working temporary has allowed me the flexibility to attend meetings around New Zealand and internationally... being able to contribute ... at a local and national level.

Women temps: intractably marginal, dilettantes or self-directed lifestylers?

From the selected data reported above it is evident that women temporary workers have a complex set of arrangements and experiences in temporary

work. Four significant points are immediately evident. The first is that the vast majority (91%) reported that they were actively choosing to temp at the present time. The second is that each woman saw herself as competent and professional in the performance of her temping roles, which included her management of change, new situations and tasks. Both of these characteristics contrast with the literature's expectations – in the former, of the high incidence of involuntary temping, and in the latter of low skills and mediocre work performance in what are expected to be 'dead-end jobs' performed by 'just a temp'. A third general characteristic of the collective sample is the respondents' awareness of, and strategies for managing, uncertainty of income in relation to temporary job tenure. A fourth significant point is the clear expression and assertion among these women, young and older, of a preference to place paid work alongside other life interests of equal or greater satisfaction – which include but are by no means confined to child care and family work. Their insistence that such preferences are the expression of active choice, defies conventional expectations of women's confused indecision and fraught tension between family work and labour market work (e.g. Hakim, 1995, 2000). The simple dualism of family life and 'career' (the latter assumed to be reserved only for those in paid employment) defining women's life choices is demonstrably disrupted for this sample of women temporary workers.

Most in this sample expressed awareness of risks of exploitative or manipulative employment relations. Most are aware that the growth in temping positions is a consequence of organizational management practices that demand contingent labour practices and displace organizational uncertainty onto the workforce. Some recognize the concerns that these organizational practices undermine permanent workers' struggles for higher wages and threaten hard-won employment conditions of earlier generations. A number of respondents had experienced being made redundant from regular positions, and others expressed awareness of the increasing insecurity of many so-called permanent jobs. Therefore, a degree of acceptance of insecurity and precariousness of employment situation was common among these temporary workers, and may have influenced their self-initiated efforts to shape their lives in ways other than through employment.

In contrast to many other temporary workers, the women in this data sample defy expectations of subjectification to marginality and precariousness. Their claimed, and apparent, abilities to take on a higher degree of income insecurity than that conventionally expected in industrial work practices, couples with the respondents' personal valuing of the advantages of flexible employment practices in order to pursue other life projects. The active pursuit of these non-work projects – which include but are by no means restricted to family work – and for which there is no indication of frivolous or trivial pursuit, readily deflect pejorative criticism of dilettante women working for 'pin money'. These factors give rise to a number of implications. In the first instance they represent further aspects of the temporary woman worker's skill, which she herself expressly values, which may also be readily appropriated to

serve strategic managerial interests. As well as being agreeably flexible employees, the aspirations and competencies of these self-directed women may serendipitously accord with the neo-liberal individualist agendas currently extolled in corporate managerial discourse. The managerial move toward contingent organizational structures and employment relations may readily utilize and exploit the abilities and self-expressivism displayed by the women in this research.

None of the respondents reported choosing to temp with the primary objective of making better money as Kunda et al.'s (2002) recent study of executive and technical contractors reports. But the majority (89%) of the women report that temping fits better with their value orientations toward a life in which activities other than employed work play a very significant part. It is the extent to which these women are prepared to actively prioritize those other vital activities and relationships over conventional models of participation in which those competing priorities are relegated that is significant. Each in her own way was working out an implicit strategy for doing more of what she wanted to do in her life, and reducing the sphere of necessity and compulsion. In contrast to earlier generations of industrial workers of both men and women, some women in contemporary conditions of work may be seeking not so much to advance spheres of freedom *within* work, but freedom *from* work, as rationalized, marketized labour.

These temps knowingly tolerated a higher degree of income uncertainty and in many cases economic insecurity. For many, this simultaneously reduced both their need for surplus economic security and the external compulsions of labour market work and management practices in contemporary organizations. Each one is seeking to construct an ontological security and self-identity independent of typical participation in employment and freed from reduction to economic security.

The preferences for temping expressed by the vast majority (91%) of this sample – and for practising their skills well in new situations but not on a permanent basis; their conscious awareness of the risks of temping and their efforts to manage those risks; and their asserted preference for the valuing of lives made more satisfying and enriched by non-work activities and value-orientations clearly contrast with the view of most academic literature. Their experiences and preferences refute the common expectations that participation in paid work, however degraded its contemporary organizational labour process, is the ultimate path to gender equality and social participation. Moreover, their reported experiences and aspirations disrupt expectations that women's oft-observed half-hearted labour force participation is a consequence of adherence to traditional, subjugated domestic roles. Their atypical, by male industrial standards, participation in labour market work has not, as conventionally expected, defaulted to an economically dependent motherhood as women's only other serious life course option.

Of course, there remains extremely good reason to be concerned about work and employment relations' degradation, and about organizational drives

toward contingent, liberalized workforces. There remain many other cases of evidence of involuntary and marginalized temporary workers. But for the women in this data set, who are choosing to work in temporary jobs, fully cognisant of their higher risk of insecurity and of the evident benefits to employers of a contingent workforce, ready dismissal as gendered victims of unequal and discriminatory employment practices must be revised. Rather, their expressed disaffection and asserted disagreeableness with conventional full-time employment and strategic management practices, and their efforts to take personal action in response, may indicate a more serious emergent contestation. These women are demonstrating efforts to reposition the role of paid work in their lives in order to pursue more satisfying, more interesting, more varied and more relational lives than those available to the majority of men in full-time employment – a point recognized by some men (see Meiskins and Whalley, 2002).

Nonetheless, we do not suggest that these socio-cultural aspirations are exclusive to women, or that modern industrial identities are essentialized or immutable. On the contrary. The conventional identity loci for women and men have been differentially culturally prescribed and have been thoroughly implicated in inferiorization and discriminatory social practices to the gross disadvantage of women. Modern industrialized masculinities, which privileged productivist and work-based identities, and feminine domestic and relationally based identities, continue to exert a compelling force in contemporary culture. The main efforts of redress continue to focus on women's emancipation from culturally prescribed gendered identities and toward their greater equality with men in productivist terms. Yet the women in this sample are addressing women's historical exclusion from masculinized prerogatives in alternative ways. Their active, ironic, dissent from work-centred lives, *and* prescribed domestic lives may indicate a reshaping of gendered identities, especially feminized identities. Strong, industrialized masculine identities may regard work-rejection as more existentially risky.

Conclusion

The assertion of non-commitment to conventional work, and work-based social expectations, and to traditional cultural expectations, in order to 'do what I'd rather be doing' exposes a rupture in the economistic and rationalization trajectories of modernity. The repetition in most contemporary analyses of work of what we suggest is an error of economism, in which it is expected that the fully occupied and socially and culturally participatory life is predicated on labour market employment, reveals the inadequacy of conventional analytical approaches to the practices of intermittent work. Taking seriously the efforts evident among this sample of women temporary workers suggests that the conventional analytic view of temporary work as comprising a near singular expe-

rience of subjectification, intractable marginality and exploitation in traditionally powerless and gendered ways must be revised. These women regard their participation in labour market work and their development of occupational competencies as one set of constituents among others in their complex projects of self-identity construction.

The ability to pick and choose when and how to work, long assumed a rare privilege of the rich and powerful, is ironically being demanded and practised by otherwise ordinary (historically working-class or lower middle-class), lifestyle seeking women. Beyond the singular privileging of work, these women are endeavouring to pursue multi-active lives (cf. Beck, 2000; Gorz, 1999; Méda, 1995), which include social and cultural participation, especially through community work and artistic endeavour, but also through self-fulfilling activities with family, friends or communities. Rather than emphasizing industrially defined equality with men, these women prioritize existential, relational autonomy over the logic of economy. Their pursuit of satisfaction of cultural or expressivist needs also reveals their willingness to limit commodity consumption as concomitant of that prioritization. While these emergent practices are presently those of individualist lifestylers strategically utilizing employer-initiated contingency, their eventually collective and political interests may pose unexpected implications for production organizations. A collective, cultural, demand for more emancipatory models of work and life and of new imaginations of equality for women and men may head off the current course of economic neo-liberalism.

Notes

- 1 These terms are variably used: 'standard' and 'non-standard' are commonly used in OECD reports and 'typical' and 'atypical' are used by the European Commission. In New Zealand both terms are used apparently.
- 2 Bradley et al. (2000) do acknowledge that 'women cannot be pigeon-holed as having a single orientation: the balance between work and family priorities in their lives varies over the life-course...' (p. 81). But their depicting of the variation to be only between work and family continues to confine the debates to conventional assumptions of women's limited life options and unequal burdens in comparison to men.
- 3 The specificity of the New Zealand case may be marked by the maintenance of a welfare state that provides universal old age pension at age 65 years. National Superannuation is available to men and women equally irrespective of a person's labour force participation history or tax contributions. Not all European-style welfare states, e.g. France, practise universal old-age pension funds on this basis.
- 4 Each of us worked with separate sources of subjects, drawing on contacts in different cities and regions to ensure a breadth of sampling.

- 5 The authors gratefully acknowledge financial support for the data collection from the University of Auckland and from the Labour Market Policy Group at Massey University, New Zealand.
- 6 It is conventional to report data on women and employment in reference to women's marital status. The implicit assumptions associated with this status, in particular about a woman's 'secondary earning' role or economic dependence are typically applied without acknowledgement of the increasing plurality of women's economic arrangements, which include not only traditional marriage and joint household finances, but a range of 'primary' earners and shared economic interdependencies, such as living with parents, children, friends, and living alone. Furthermore, many contemporary marriages or de facto relationships (a common occurrence in New Zealand), which may include children, maintain separate personal finances.
- 7 Other questions, not included in the discussion in this article, addressed the temps' experiences with agencies, skills acquisition and training, choosing assignments, relationships with co-workers, negotiating rates of pay and employment conditions, sexual harassment, trade union affiliation, and further details on various aspects of temping work in non clerical positions. Details of financial commitments and consumption patterns of this sample of temporary workers are not discussed.
- 8 The term 'role' appeared to be in common usage by most respondents, just as it is commonly used in industries regularly engaging temporary women employees.

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Date submitted December 2002

Date accepted September 2003