

Laboring under Uncertainty: Identity Renegotiation among Contingent Workers

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Relying on interviews with contingent workers in diverse jobs, this article explores the motivations underlying worker consent, in particular, workers' commitment to employers who did little to encourage it. Driven by the need to address the "spoiled identity" problem brought on by contingent employment, workers engaged in identity-management strategies that included the following: defining a willingness to work hard rather than the job per se as determinative of personal value, asserting an alternative vocation as one's appropriate identity-conferring occupation, and aligning with managers as a reference group. These strategies had the ideological effect of reaffirming a managerial ideology that hampered the ability to formulate a critique of existing employment relations. A much smaller group, made up of disillusioned day laborers with few illusions about middle-class respectability, rejected identity-management strategies and regarded their relationship with employers in the purely instrumental terms that the business press assumes would apply to all workers. The article concludes that cultural lag and the raw appeal of the notion of a caring employer may underlie the persistence of the accommodationist orientations displayed by most of these workers.

Changes in the nature of employment relations, particularly the replacement of internal labor markets with pay-for-performance arrangements (Capelli 1999), raise in a new context old questions about the bases of worker loyalty and consent. The rise of "contingent" employment—in which workers lack an implicit or explicit contract for ongoing employment (Hipple 1998)¹—provides a context for examining workers' acquiescence or resistance to the new arrangement. The reconfiguration of jobs since the 1980s has produced insiders and outsiders (Harrison 1994:196; Osterman 1999; Pfeffer and Baron 1988; Vallas 1999:91–94). In general, discontent and resistance on the part of the outsiders are to be expected (Hodson 1995), and

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researchers have sought to uncover these orientations among contingent workers. They have certainly found discontent (Henson 1996; McAllister 1998; Parker 1994; Rogers 2000) and, in contexts in which organizing was possible, they have found organized resistance. Despite the efforts of unions and other groups to contest the incursion of flexible work regimes, however, resistance among contingent workers more commonly has assumed the form of individual contestation: restricting output (Barker 1998:207; Henson 1996:81; Parker 1994:119), walking off the job (Parker 1994:119), carelessness with inventory (Parker 1994:120), and “minute pinching,” or doctoring time cards (Henson 1996:81; Parker 1994:118).

Acts of organized resistance are far less common than consent, and the story of contingent workers tends primarily to be one of accommodation to the established employment system (Gottfried 1992; Henson 1996:84; Rogers 2000:chap. 5; Smith 1998, 2001). The temporary workers Smith studied (1998; 2001:chap. 4) prided themselves on their hard work and “kept any resentments to themselves” (2001:106). This is not surprising, since muted resentment is the case in the workplace more generally, where the objective and subjective factors legitimizing workplace social relations and facilitating the day-to-day reproduction of consent tend to override instances of resistance (Thompson 1983:154).

It is surprising, however, when workers engage in “enthusiastic participation” (Hodson 1996) in work settings that offer few or no rewards for it. The worker behaviors Smith’s fieldwork uncovered went far beyond mere accommodation: most temporary workers labored extremely hard and engaged in “deep self-discipline” to ensure that they met or exceeded the company’s production goals (1998; 2001:chap. 4). Similarly, Osterman (1999) found workers’ eager participation in work-team endeavors surprising in the face of employers’ lack of commitment to them, and Heckscher (1995) noted upper management’s surprise at lower-level managers’ diligence in the face of their own lack of commitment. Though I do not discount instrumental motivations, I argue that some contingent workers labor harder than the objective incentive system warrants for reasons stemming from internal, psychological sources: their identities and self-respect are tied to the dutiful work performance and “good worker” ideology that characterized the Fordist relationship. Considering such subjective incentives, not just instrumental ones, is obligatory in assessing contingent worker loyalty and consent.

THE CHANGED EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP, WORKER RESPONSES, AND MANAGERIAL IDEOLOGY

A hallmark of the Fordist employment relations that held sway for much of the twentieth century was a bargain between workers and employers in which workers traded loyalty and hard work for job security. Internal company policies linked the long-term material interests of many workers to employers through internal labor markets, company-specific training, stock sharing, and near-guarantees of employment security.² The bargain was never monolithic, and even at its height was restricted

to the labor force elite: workers in the primary labor force, particularly white men. Nor did the bargain successfully preclude conflict: the labor relations of the era were continually marked by resistance (Hodson and Sullivan 1985; Vallas 1991). Yet, within these limits, the notion of a bargain between employer and employee informed many workers' and employers' orientation to the employment contract (Osterman 1999).

Since roughly the 1980s, processes of economic restructuring have eroded this bargain and replaced it with one in which employers are not expected to offer guarantees of lifelong employment or internal labor markets and workers are not expected to maintain loyalty to any one employer.³ The rise of contingent work is a component of this profound restructuring of workplace relations.

Assessments of what economic restructuring and contingent labor markets mean for workers vary markedly. The business press⁴ stresses the advantages to workers of being "free agents" who move from job to job while continually adding to their store of human capital assets. *Business Week* described the "Me, Inc." model, in which workers are loyal only to themselves and use jobs to successfully further their individual ends (see DiTomaso 2000; Scully 2000). They are admonished to forget notions of loyalty to any employer and to think of themselves instead as entrepreneurs in "the creation—and maintenance—of A BRAND CALLED YOU" (Peters 1997; capitalization in original). Scholars of employment relations are less sanguine, fearing that contingent employment entails many of the downsides associated with employment in the secondary labor market: insecurity, low wages, few benefits, and poor working conditions (Barker and Christensen 1998; Osterman 1999). Ethnographies of contingent workers in low-level jobs confirm these fears and document mistreatment ranging from failure to receive payment to being excluded and isolated (Henson 1996; McAllister 1998; Parker 1994; Rogers 2000; Smith 1998), although highly skilled contingent workers' experience is more positive for reasons ranging from enhanced autonomy to increased skill development opportunities (Applebaum and Batt 1994; Kunda, Barley, and Evans 2002).

An important ideological component of the old Fordist framework is the "managerial ideology" that mutes workers' expression—and even formulation—of a critique of existing authority relations (Burawoy 1979; Edwards 1979; Jackman 1994:67; O'Connor 1984; Vallas 1991).⁵ The managerial ideology holds that managers are the appropriate parties in charge of production and employment decisions, that personal identification with the company's interests is expected, and that a highly developed work ethic is personally rewarding. This ideology can blind workers to alternative arrangements and hinder the development of class consciousness (Joyce 1980; Offe 1984). Adherence to the ideology in the Fordist era was facilitated by structures such as internal labor markets that foster an individualistic career orientation that, in turn, dissolves solidarity within the ranks and helps workers to identify their interests with the firm's. Workers' interests become so closely aligned with the firms' that "'we' now means 'we the firm,' not 'we the workers'" (Edwards 1979:148). Indeed, the "repressive essence" of this form of

worker control is that the “corporation demands the worker’s soul, or at least the worker’s identity” (Edwards 1979:152). In the words of Deetz (1992:42), “The disciplined member of the corporation wants on his or her own what the corporation wants.”

The managerial ideology reached its apogee among monopoly sector firms during the Fordist period, but the decline of the Fordist arrangement has not meant the demise of the ideology itself. With the erosion of job security and internal labor market supports, one would expect the power of managerial ideology to atrophy and contingent workers’ approach to the work relationship to be less supportive of the ideology. Further, one would expect conversion to the “Me, Inc.” ideology among some higher-skilled contingent workers. Yet, as the findings described below suggest, the great majority of workers had not converted to the new orientation but instead had clung to the old, raising the problem of how to explain the apparent acceptance of an ideology whose time seems past.

MOTIVATIONS FOR HARD WORK IN UNCERTAIN CONDITIONS

Research evidence on contingent workers’ motivation for working dutifully is slim, but three explanations are plausible. First, such work orientations may be *instrumental* for many reasons. Working dutifully retains relevancy in the still-existing segments of the labor market that many workers aspire to (Osterman 1999). Further, temporary agencies base future assignments partly on evidence of workers’ good performance in previous assignments, providing instrumental incentives for such performances. Hard work also may be a rational, instrumental response to the incentives the labor market offers: it may lead to the acquisition of new skills that increase the worker’s market value to the next employer. Less optimistically, fear of job loss in the short term or of negative references in the long term might inform a tendency to stifle protest and to perform beyond expectations.

Second, people accede to unequal relationships for *structural* reasons: fear of reprisals, cultural divisions among them that impede mobilization efforts, and cynicism stemming from past failures, to name just a few (Scott 1990:86). Many structural factors inhibit contingent workers’ ability to organize, ranging from lack of a permanent worksite that might lead to solidarity with other workers to the National Labor Relations Act’s (NLRA’s) prohibition of practices such as multiemployer bargaining, secondary boycotts, and prehire agreements that are needed for craft-style unionism (Cobble 1991; Middleton 1999).

I propose a third reason for contingent workers’ high levels of work commitment, one that has recourse to *internal*, psychological states. I ask whether instrumental and structural reasons provide a complete explanation for endorsement of an ideology of hard work, or whether endorsements of “good worker” behavior derive from other motivations. While not discounting instrumental and structural factors supporting consent, I seek to identify internal psychological mechanisms that also may be operative.

IDENTITY WORK

This article examines why contingent workers continue to support managerial goals even in situations that lack the traditional supports (such as internal labor markets or the possibility of securing permanent employment) that might encourage such an orientation. That such workers would act on the precepts of the old Fordist social contract in a context in which employers themselves make them aware of the futility of such engagement suggests that the impetus lies deeper than the instrumental level. It is tied to identity issues.

The breakdown of the old socially endorsed bargain between workers and employers requires contingent workers to find other ways to cobble together their identities as socially valued workers. What was once a coherent package—employers conveying status in return for skills in the context of a long-term relationship—has broken down. Workers now must piece together the elements of a positive identity as workers, in contrast to an earlier generation for whom long-term employment was associated not only with material rewards but also with social ones, such as prestige and identity. The status was automatic, conveyed along with the company parking space perhaps, and individual strategies for establishing and maintaining a positive work identity were less necessary. Now, however, with the demise of automatically conferred status, contingent workers need identity-maintenance strategies to help them build a social identity and its accompanying sense of self-worth.

One task such workers must accomplish is to maintain dignity in the face of workplace assaults on it. Indeed, in a society that has glorified full-time permanent employment as a marker of success and even adult status (Barker 1998; Newman 1999:chap. 4), working contingently is tantamount to a “spoiled identity” (Goffman 1963), a theme developed by Henson (1996) in regard to temporary workers. The task of personally managing identity issues is ever present, as interactions with others force workers to confront the imputation of negative assumptions about their qualifications, abilities, and character (Henson 1996:145; Newman 1988, 1999; Rogers 2000; Schwalbe 1986).

“Identity work” refers to the activities through which individuals “create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept” (Snow and Anderson 1987:1348). Note that this formulation replaces the primacy of the “reflected appraisal” of others captured by the looking-glass self metaphor (Cooley [1902] 1964) with a more active notion of self-as-cause, or “self efficacy” (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983). “Self efficacy” invokes the notion that human beings are “motivated to experience themselves as causal agents in their environment” (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983:79). While work settings can impose restrictions on individual agency, workers use whatever latitude the system affords to construct meanings that lend support to a preferred rather than an ascribed identity (Burawoy 1979; Henson 1996:159). The motivation for identity work is most compelling for society’s marginalized groups, and intensive identity work has been found among those in mental hospitals (Goffman 1961), street-corner denizens

(Liebow 1967), and the homeless (Liebow 1993; Snow and Anderson 1987). Though not as marginalized as these groups, contingent workers also must devise ways to deflect the damage that stigma can wreak on their self-esteem.

Many strategies for identity re-creation are possible, including physical isolation (Goffman 1961), passing as normal (Goffman 1961; Henson 1996:150–55; Snow and Anderson 1987), dissociating from similarly stigmatized others (Henson 1996; Henson and Rogers 2001:230; Rogers 2000; Smith 2001; Snow and Anderson 1987), offering a “cover story” based on an alternative identity (Henson 1996:155–62; Rogers 2000:113; Henson and Rogers 2001:232–33), and aligning with management’s goals (Rogers 2000:101). Of these strategies, two are particularly relevant for understanding how identity work in contingent jobs can support the managerial ideology and preclude the consideration of alternatives—presenting an alternative identity and evincing dedication to the work ethic.

Among the most common strategies reported in the literature is presenting an alternative identity that offers a cover story to explain one’s presence in a stigmatized role. “Laminations” on the truth, including financial embellishment and future-oriented fabrications, were common among the homeless people Snow and Anderson (1987) interviewed. While the temporary workers Rogers described had less fanciful cover stories, they were similarly eager to define themselves as “really” artists, teachers, students, or actors. As mere occupational transients in stigmatized jobs (Henson 1996), temporary workers could align with their more socially valued occupation and thus maintain self-esteem. In short, workers may cope with the identity management difficulties contingent work presents by viewing the work as taking up the unimportant present, as a hesitation on the path to the still-valued outcome of individual career success. This adaptation is similar to one Chinoy ([1955] 1992) noted a half century ago among auto workers who endured job tedium and indignities by invoking “utopian dreams” of replacing factory jobs with self-employment or farming. As Chinoy noted, “By seeking to convince others of the reality and strength of his aspirations, he [the auto worker] fosters his belief in his own ambition and perseverance” (p. 95).

Another way to maintain dignity despite the lack of socially respectable employment is to express commitment to the primary principle of the managerial ideology: hard work. If Everett Hughes (1984:339) is right that “work is one of the more important parts of . . . social identity, of . . . self, of . . . fate, in the one life [one] has to live,” then workers who work hard despite adversity in temporary and subcontracting jobs that go nowhere insist on enacting a key part of themselves. By claiming “I work hard because I believe that doing anything less is beneath me,” they bolster their sense of themselves as really being the good workers required for moral approbation. By reacting to perceived indignities with renewed displays of hard work, these workers confirm that they are worthy of status. In the process, the dominant ideology is left unquestioned and resistance becomes more unlikely. A concomitant strategy is to identify with the employer’s interests, which allows workers to sidestep to some extent their feelings of helplessness. Such a process entails adopting

the employer's perspective, a stance supported by a socially available pro-corporate ideology and few available alternative ones. Doing so can culminate in adopting management's standpoint to blot out one's own (Earnest 1992) and in the process arrogating to oneself a bit of the employer's social value.

The strategies described above involve individual identity-defensive solutions rather than any questioning of the given order. A worker may abandon hope of success in this particular job but not abandon the dream or the sense of oneself as worthy of achieving it. By invoking career attachments or work behaviors and beliefs that transcend a present suffused with the unflattering self-images associated with contingent work, these workers can maintain identities grounded in higher-status, full-time occupations or in themselves as good, hardworking people.

This article applies theories of identity work to the context of contingent workers, seeking to understand at a micro level how they employed these coping strategies and at a macro level how such individual-centered strategies perpetuate the existing employment situation.

METHODS AND DATA

In 1996 I interviewed twenty-seven contingent workers, two union organizers, and the director of a temporary agency in a mid-sized urban area in coastal central California. Workers were in three types of work arrangement: contractors and subcontractors who worked for the duration of a project, temporaries formally employed by temporary help agencies that place them in work settings for varied periods, and day laborers whose work was contracted for on a daily or hourly basis. Although some interviewees were between jobs, all had worked on a contingent basis within the previous six months. Their reasons for such employment varied, but with a few exceptions (discussed below), all would have preferred stable employment, and all but the day laborers reported some degree of anxiety about their uncertain incomes.

The contingent workers were racially homogeneous—all but one were non-Hispanic whites—but were diverse on other dimensions. Most notably, their jobs spanned the various dimensions of contingent work: four day laborers, ten temporary agency employees, eleven independent contractors, and two workers whose employers, the Park Service and the Postal Service, placed them in what they called "casual/temporary" employment categories. Jobs for these contingent workers included software engineer, aerospace engineer, chemist, strategic consultant, materials supplier, real estate appraiser, interpretive guide, letter carrier, clerical worker, ski instructor, telephone solicitor, and crop harvester. Nine interviewees were women, and the ages of workers ranged from twenty-two to seventy-two.

I recruited workers to interview in several ways. Eight responded to a newspaper advertisement that offered a payment, seven volunteered to be interviewed after a presentation I made at a "job club" for laid-off professionals, and the remainder came from referrals. I conducted interviews in settings convenient to the interviewee: parks, coffee shops, their homes, or a university office. Questions invited

detailed answers about the nature of their recent employment, how they felt about various aspects of it, how it differed from previous work experiences, how they addressed dilemmas on the job, the qualities they thought it important to have for such work, and several demographic questions.

Interviews averaged an hour and a half and were taped, transcribed, and then coded into categories that encompassed the types of problems workers confronted and the ways they managed them. Using principles of analytic induction (Charmaz 1983), I coded each interview shortly after conducting it. While I began early interviews with a set of identified topics, new categories tended to emerge, so I frequently needed to add a code or revise an existing one to reflect an emerging pattern. By constantly comparing concepts as they emerged, I was able to fine-tune some (the “coping” category became a half-dozen specific categories) and eliminate others (“loyalty to employer” morphed into loyalty to a vision of oneself). This process entailed repeatedly returning to earlier coded transcripts to recode. For example, partway through the interviews, I noticed that some workers identified with employers’ interests, so I returned to earlier interviews to look for and code references to this pattern. I also searched for negative cases—those that failed to support the emerging categories. This data analysis process progressively narrows a great deal of interview data into smaller groups of key concepts supported by data from many interviews. The final forty-four categories represent concepts that emerged from this process. Continually writing analytic memos furthered the process of formulating and working out intellectually the concepts and the theoretical explanations. Some analytic memos turned out to be more important than others, and the writing of these memos facilitated interpretation of the data. Interpretations stemmed from my understanding of theory and research in the labor process and social psychology areas, in a process that always returned to the data for support.

The nature of the sample contrasts with that of Smith (1998, 2001), who also examined contingent workers’ motivation for hard work. Whereas her sample could be described as composed of the hopeful, those reported on here could be described as the hopeless—those for whom employers offered little opportunity for parlaying hard work into permanent employment. Understanding the motivations of the latter group complements Smith’s work while building on that of others who have examined identity management among contingent workers (Henson 1996; Rogers 2000). Smith’s white-collar workers comprised two groups: temporaries with access to a type of internal labor market that offered the hope of full employment (1998; 2001:chap. 4) and laid-off professionals retooling their employment profiles under the tutelage of a state-run club (2001:chap. 5). Instrumental rationales tended to dominate both groups’ orientation to employment. Workers in the former group knew that employers often chose permanent employees from among temporaries, and they worked hard in the hope of passing such screening (Smith 2001:112). They were aided in this instrumental orientation by inclusion in the company’s participative system, which “tapped temporary workers’ desire to shine and to rise to new demanding work situations, further deepening their work commitment”

(Smith 1998:419). Instrumental rationales operated differently for Smith's unemployed professionals, whose trainers exhorted them to exploit every relationship or opportunity that might network them into a job. According to the employment club's literature, "Whether you are in the elevator, the ladies' room, or waiting at the bar, start talking [about your job skills]" (Smith 2001:148). Yet work-related behaviors stem from many motivations, not all of them purposive or instrumental. Some of Smith's unemployed professionals balked at the expectation that virtually every waking moment be oriented to strategic self-presentation. Findings from the sample reported on here further our understanding of motivations for hard work and complement Smith's findings: whereas instrumental rationales tended to dominate in her white-collar samples, this study helps to draw out the noninstrumental themes motivating hard work.

EMPLOYERS' DISREGARD AND WORKERS' ACCOMMODATIONS

Results are divided into two parts. The first demonstrates employers' failure to offer workers incentives to expect a payoff for dutiful work. The second documents how, with some notable exceptions, most workers respond to this failure by engaging in identity work that left the managerial ideology unquestioned.

Worklife Realities: The Experience of Powerlessness

Workers' daily experiences of employers' actions eroded any instrumental basis for performing beyond expectations. The employment relations they described were focused on task delivery and offered few if any invitations to think of the employment relationship as invested with a personalized interest in the employee. No employers spoke of "teamwork" or "participation" in order to motivate workers, and the few workers who had hoped that their jobs would become permanent ended up disappointed. As described below, workers' sense of powerlessness in the employment bargain was brought home to them daily.

The most obvious way workers experienced powerlessness was employers' denial of job security (by definition, contingent work is insecure), a complaint noted by many. In spite of their realization that any particular job was almost certain to be short lived, workers in a variety of jobs noted how easy it was to get their hopes up, especially when a job was advertised as "temp to perm" or "temp to hire" (meaning that the possibility exists of conversion to permanent employment; see also Smith 1997). Describing how he felt the fool for believing such advertisements despite continual disappointment, one contractor compared himself to a battered wife:

I felt like when a woman gets in the same abusive situation time after time. I go to work for a company and then they fold six months later. Each time you think it's going to be different, but something always happens. At first you think, it's me; there's something wrong with me.

A subcontractor who worried about where his next job would come from said:

It's a crap shoot. . . . I can't tell you how many times I've anticipated a good three months or a good six months. God! I can do this! Then I find out that on this job, they didn't get the contract, on that job the client decided to do it himself, this other one just didn't work out.

Efforts to be on one's best behavior in the hope of generating a new contract or hiring on permanently often were futile. A real estate appraiser told how hard she worked, hoping a temporary job would turn into the permanent job the advertisement had suggested: "I did it all: seventy-two-hour turnaround, bonus plan, all day and night with no overtime! I gained respect, but I got laid off anyway."

Many spoke of the deflation they felt at being "let go" (the expression most used to denote a job's ending). A male clerical temporary worker said that he often gets excited about a new job and forgets that he's "just a temp." He spoke of his soon-to-end job in a community mental health office in glowing terms: "The office is a mix of friendly professionalism. . . . It feels exhilarating being of service and getting paid for it!" Losing the job made him feel like he was "running through cold molasses. You go and give them your best and they still let you go."

Because employers' decisions on such matters are unilateral and arbitrary and often have little to do with workers' performance, it is not surprising that workers felt so little sense of efficacy, so little sense that their actions affected the outcome. The battered but loyal wife analogy is apt. Thus, in seeking to manage feelings of constant disappointment when anticipated jobs do not materialize or existing ones do not last, it seems surprising that so many coped by pouring out even more good worker behavior, as described below.

Workers articulated grievances about their treatment. All offered examples of having felt ill used. Employers' frequent unwillingness to train workers was a contentious issue for many. One interviewee who himself often hired subcontractors was explicit about refusing to hire anyone who was not "zero maintenance," a term that connotes a worker who exacts no supervisory attention. Similarly, a subcontractor discussed employers' antipathy to what they call "hand-holding":

I *can* go back to the contractor and say, "Hey, I don't understand something. Where can I get this information?" I'll do that on occasion, but I have to weigh it with appearance, because I know they don't want to see hand-holding. They make that clear.

In one case, the subcontractor's employer wanted a report written in a specific style but provided no sample—which would have been hand-holding—and then docked his pay for the three and a half hours the employer claimed it took to rewrite the report.

A materials supplier temp told how employers' refusal to provide training cost him a job: "I am a Mac[intosh] fanatic and I kept telling them I don't know anything about PCs, and they said, 'You'll pick it up.' So I thought I'd give it a try." He ended up getting fired.

Employers did not allow contractors to bill for time spent learning the site-specific

elements necessary for a job. Pay was based on output, not input, and employers were unwilling to pay for the learning curve. Moreover, tasks often took longer than estimated in the contract. As one interviewee said, “If I make an agreement that this is going to take me ten hours and it takes thirty, I lost.”

Independent contractors named another source of discontent: simply not being paid. A chemist had his employers agree to a contract but on being billed claim, “This is outrageous!” and refuse to pay. He noted another payment problem: “It’s in a subcontractor’s contract that we only get paid if the original client pays. You’re out of the loop: you have no idea what the client and the contractor are agreeing to. All in good faith, right? That’s all you have to go by!” Another contractor described employers who liked to do “brain-picking,” which is “getting something for free. You know, consulting you [informally] about your view on this and that.”

Many resented bearing the brunt of bad business decisions. For example, in the hope of a renewed contract, a materials supplier worked long hours with his team and was quite pleased when they met their deadline and even “smoked the schedule” by a day. As a result, his group got an order for one hundred more units and he felt assured of continued employment. But cash flow problems in a different unit caused thirty-two contractors to be laid off, including him. Another contractor had a similar complaint of mismanagement: “They’d fly people to Silicon Valley for a ten-minute meeting, have cost overruns, and fire *me!*”

Many complained of employers’ desire to “drive” temporary workers. It is often because of a time crunch that extra workers are called in at all, so pressure is structured in. According to a temporary accountant:

They hire temps and burn them out. . . . [Employers] have a real high turnover rate; they expect it. But [they] don’t have to worry, you just call the agency and say, “Send two more bodies over.” You run through them.

A temporary postal employee complained of the blue-collar equivalent: “They shuffle all the routes and give the *worst* ones to me. I’ll have no consistent line of travel. I have to do lots more reorganizing of mail and lots more driving.”

These workers’ nebulous relationship to employment in a particular company made them feel as though they were not part of the team, which should undermine identification with the company and thus with managerial ideology. Many reported wearing badges that read “nonemployee,” and many were not included in formal or informal company social functions. An electronics assembler said, “They had a Christmas party, but I didn’t know for a fact whether I was invited or not.” She attended lunches sometimes, “but still, it’s not like my old perm job where I knew the names of everyone’s kids.”

Finally, in stark contrast to paternalist employment relations, an electronics assembler who regularly put in fifty-hour weeks had to beg for one day off—“They let me make up [the work] beforehand”—but said she would not dare ask for a week off to see a new grandchild.

Thus contingent workers faced an array of injustices similar to those documented

by other ethnographies of contingent workers (see, e.g., Henson 1996; Parker 1994; Rogers 2000): having to be on one's best behavior despite being "driven," being penalized for employers' refusal to train and for their bad business decisions, being given the most onerous tasks, being lied to, being excluded as members of the team, on occasion not being paid, and, finally, having to supplicate in order to get a day off. These raw facts of employers' unwillingness to uphold the old employment bargain and their general lack of commitment to workers should undermine workers' support for the managerial ethos. Implicit in these complaints is the comparison to the old contract. Previously, under the Fordist employment contract, training would have been conceived by both parties as flowing from the principle that employees are valuable and need job-specific training and that the employer recognizes the importance of such an investment. Calling training "hand-holding" is the antithesis of the old contractual relationship. Similarly, the notion of violated equity expressed by the people laid off because of poor business decisions only registers as a complaint in comparison to the old system, where salary workers had some expectation of rough justice.

Underlying the above sources of discontent is contingent workers' powerlessness relative to employers. This powerlessness derived from the combined effects of a labor market that left many workers (particularly those with fewer skills) vulnerable and desperate and a lack of union protection. Workers were aware of their relative powerlessness, as seen in answers to a question about qualities desirable for a contingent worker. Typical of such answers are the following: "Know how to zipper your lip," "Try to give the boss what he wants," and "Want to do what your boss tells you, even if you know better." One summed up his lack of power in the employment relationship by noting that such work required "an ability to eat humble pie. You have to eat a lot of humble pie if you want an entrée."

In sum, employers' greater power in structuring the terms of employment meant that they were free to drive a bargain that offered few of the rewards that would elicit dedicated hard work in return. They offered nothing that would impel a self-interested, utility-maximizing actor to engage in the "hungry ballplayer" behaviors that would have redounded to the advancement of a 1950s junior executive.

CONTINGENT WORKERS' RESPONSES

Contingent workers responded in two distinct ways to their employment situations. Most invoked identity-management strategies to contend with feelings of frustration, injustice, and devaluation. These individual strategies succeeded in allaying the "spoiled identity" problem, but they also derailed the formulation of critiques of the employment relationship and thus valorized the managerial ethos. A second and far smaller group responded with a less accommodating stance. This group rejected the notion that dutiful work is imbued with inherent nobility, and they treated the employment relationship as strictly instrumental.

Accommodating the Employment Relationship through Identity Management Strategies

Holding Alternative Career Attachments

Several contingent workers defined themselves by alternative avocations, or cover stories, to explain their presence in a stigmatized occupational niche. The director of a temporary agency said that many considered themselves actors and chose temporary work because it accommodated their need to take time off for auditions. One interviewee regarded his volunteer firefighter job as more indicative of who he is than his job as a temporary ski instructor. Two women who were frustrated by their agencies' inability to place them in jobs higher than low-level clerical ones described this situation as the price they paid to have time to pursue their avocations as artists.

A variation on this "I'm on the path to success" theme were the workers who saw their contingent work as taking up the unimportant present, as a mere way station on the road to future riches. A young recovering drug addict was temping until "something big" came up: "If you've got the capital, you can start a lot of things. I've learned, you know. Playing the stock market—it's filled with all these goodies!" Until such an opportunity presented itself, he worked on a commission-only basis for a telemarketing charity, averaging under \$3 an hour. Another was convinced of the riches that awaited when she scrambled together the start-up money for a Mary Kay Cosmetics franchise. A few contractors were seeking to hook into start-up companies before the companies "went public." According to one, "I see this [consulting] as an opportunity to make a lot of money by working with entrepreneurs and becoming a part owner or board member. I've always wanted to be a part owner, the executive, the decision maker." Similarly, a software engineer was excited about a deal with a small start-up company to receive some ownership rights in lieu of a fee, and he hoped for more such deals. The problem with these schemes is that it is hard to maintain an identity as an actor, artist, stock market winner, or financial tycoon over time, because, unlike the more abstract, ethical goal of performing like a dignified professional, these are difficult goals to attain. Nevertheless, such adaptations operate to burnish self-esteem by linking self-worth to a high-status, nonstigmatized occupational trajectory, and they show continued belief in the importance of a career to self-fulfillment.

Dedication to the Work Ethic

The desire to sustain a self-image as a socially valued good worker appeared to motivate many. Several workers clung to a sense of self as a dignified worker who acts decently despite adversity and unfairness. When I asked a legal secretary who had worked for several decades as a temporary if she had ever considered settling into a permanent job and being loyal to one employer, she took offense: "I'm a loyal temp, you know. I'm just loyal. It has nothing to do with whether you're temp

or perm.” Once when she was fired for too many typing errors, she fixed the errors on her own time and returned the manuscript. For her, being a serious, committed worker was central to her sense of identity. So, too, for a retired engineer subcontracting back to his former employer who described himself as a committed worker despite his better judgment: “[I’m loyal] even though the company is insensitive to the employees. They’re out for themselves. But you develop a certain loyalty.”

Similarly, an office administrator explained why she frequently worked exhausting hours: “I had myself convinced that I was doing it for my own sanity. I was so buried [in work] that it was the only way to stay on top of things.” When I asked why she cared if tasks did not get accomplished, she replied by presenting her personal ethical code:

I don’t treat this job any different than when I worked at [a permanent job.] Because I think that’s something in your character and it’s going to follow you, no matter where you go, no matter what position it is, no matter what your hours are, no matter what your salary is.

A temporary postal worker described his “carriers’ pride”:

I want to feel like I’m in the community and I’m giving good service. Today, for example, someone had opened a letter that contained a money order. So I had to put on the image of the concerned professional [to repair the damage]. You have to be cheerful at each stop; you have to treat each as special. I would feel guilty if I didn’t. I want to feel like I’m serving the community.

When I asked if he had ever considered tossing third-class mail in a dumpster, he answered in shock, “[I would be] violating the sanctity of the mail!” This pride in his work is a variant of professional work identity.

A medical transcriptionist was drawn into unwanted overtime out of a sense of loyalty to the group, the larger purpose of ophthalmology, and her sense of herself as a dedicated worker:

[The doctor] said, “Everybody is pitching in. You know Linda is working this number of hours and Dave is working that number of hours.” I gave him a little tutorial on the nature of my relationship, and how it was different from theirs [since they were permanent workers]. But I liked him and he was nice to me . . . and I can get sucked in. . . . You’ve got a bright young doctor and he’s keeping old people from going blind. Okay, I’ll work a few more hours.

By drawing on a sense of self as a dignified and responsible worker, these interviewees sought to avert the threats to status and identity that contingent work imposed.

A caveat is in order: Some displays of hard work were motivated by instrumental concerns, such as fear of termination or the hope of securing future work. An electronics assembler, for example, typically arrived twenty minutes early because she knew that if bad traffic caused her to be late, “they’d ship [her] home real quick.” Usually, however, motivations were more complex. A temporary postal worker lived in “constant fear” that he would be terminated—a practical concern—yet with no supervisor watching, he did things (what he called “connecting with people”)

that made him a superlative carrier: “Like if there’s a younger kid, I’d change my way of interacting by using more slang. And if it’s an elderly gentleman, then I’d show a little respect. I kind of adjust.” Although he was afraid of being terminated, personal reasons led him to act as a community builder far from the eyes of supervisors.

A materials supplier described his hard work as stemming from fear of garnering a bad professional reputation that would hurt future employment prospects, as did an independent contractor who knocked six hours off a client’s bill because his supervisor threatened, “If you want to work in this town then you’ll just have to be flexible.” But the prospect of future work was not the only principle at play. He also took personal pride in his work: “I am very, very thorough. That’s probably one of my trademarks. . . . Again, I’m thorough and I’m conscientious that what I’m doing is correct. I submit a pretty high level of work.” So while the practical fear of being blackballed influenced his decision to reduce the bill, his invocation of a personal “trademark” as conscientious suggests that more than fear impelled him. Thus fear of termination or of a bad reputation inspired some vigorous work habits. That workers act instrumentally is not surprising; what is noteworthy is the number for whom it was not the sole reason.⁶

Identification with Employers’ Interests

The final identity management adaptation was identification with employers’ interests. Whereas the workers I interviewed invoked no kind of structural analysis to explain their situations, they were eager to use structural explanations to explain bosses’. The materials’ supplier who lost a job despite “smoking the schedule” said: “[The boss] explained it and was really supportive. And I wasn’t really surprised; so many companies cut operating costs, and the way to do it is to get rid of folks across the board.”

A temporary worker whose contract had been renewed several times and who longed for permanent employment could not understand my suggestion that she might deserve it: “I think this situation doesn’t allow for it to become a permanent job. We’re building a prototype. The customer is going to purchase it from us, and then another model after that, but that’s all we have contracts for.” It is ironic that the “we” she spoke of was the company and did not include her. In response to my question about what qualities are good to have for temporary work, which I expected to elicit responses such as “It helps to have patience,” she instead took the employers’ stance: “I think you would want somebody who’s conscientious, dedicated, and thorough. A lot of times the contractors aren’t dedicated. . . . They do exactly what they’re told, they don’t ask questions, they don’t go beyond their scope” (see also Smith 2001). Similarly, in discussing the practice of laying off elderly workers, a temporary accountant had an easy time understanding: “You’re not only cutting salaries, but you cut your contingent liability for pension costs over time. It makes a lot of sense when you look at it from a dollars-and-cents perspective.”

In the rush to understand employers' points of view, these workers lose sight of their own immediate interests. By aligning themselves with employers, they imagine they have the same status as management, thus diluting the negative connotations of their actual status. This orientation may help them to cope with the self-esteem difficulties attendant to contingent work, but it is at odds with any kind of critique of employers. Such a thorough identification with the business milieu is again testimony to the tenacity of the managerial ethos. In sum, these workers actively participated in creating an ideology that upheld the importance of hard work and that affirmed a managerial ideology.

Rejecting the Ideal

It would be misleading to imply that all these workers bought into the managerial ideology. A few of them dreaded the thought of permanent employment. One temporary sales worker had a vivid image of permanent work:

I don't have to be in a cubicle. That's the freedom that's worth scrambling by on eight bucks an hour for. [When permanent workers return from vacations] they come back to the pain of reality in their little cubicle. They scream and yell. God, that's so bad! I would rather make less and do what I do. I honestly would have no hair, wrinkled. I would be miserable, fat, totally out of shape, probably could never sustain a relationship, or if I did, it'd probably be the same as me, miserable. I don't want to fall into that! This [temp work] is so much a better deal.

Another predicted an even more dire fate if he returned to permanent work:

If I had continued that way I'd be one of these guys who's forty and has a big heart attack. I was beginning to get physical symptoms, anxiety attacks, not sleeping at night. . . . I'd wake up in the middle of the night, start taking down notes of stuff you have to do the next day. . . . Eventually the wheel starts falling off the wagon.

Yet these men's experiences point to greater ambiguity than their statements would suggest. The temporary sales worker had recently lost a serious girlfriend who did not want a life with such a high degree of income unpredictability. And the man who feared a heart attack waffled: "I get into periods of, 'I've had it with this uncertainty!' and apply for a job as a head of finance, comptroller, head of strategic planning. Then I'd get to the interview and think, Wait a minute. This is nuts! Am I going back in that environment?' Then I'll come back in the other direction. So it hasn't been consistent."

A small subset of workers with no illusions about finding dignity in work felt none of this ambivalence in rejecting the ideal. Casual day laborers living on the margins of society, these four men found employment as construction or janitorial workers and treated their jobs solely as cash transactions. According to one:

The main motivating factor was I wanted to make quick money. I would be down at the unemployment office where guys would look around for able bodies to do

the work. A lot of the people he'd pick were illegals who wanted work for the same reason I did, and there were no questions asked.

Another expressed what he considered the best thing about temporary work: "I got paid by the day. There weren't any expectations on me by the employer. I really didn't feel any indebtedness to the guy. He was using me as well as me using him. I was just a mule to him." He went on to explain the difference between the kind of workers who use agencies and the kind who do not:

The people that use Kelly [Staffing Services] or something, they want to get a [permanent] job or make friends. They want to get to know people; they want their lives to be normal. The guys sitting down at the unemployment office on the wall, they just want that money for the day. They don't want to be buddies with anybody. They don't want anybody to know them. They just want the cash and they just want to do the job and go do whatever they're going to do with the money. You see the difference? It's like if *you* walk into the office over there, you're going to want to look good and you want to present yourself good. But when you're waiting for a guy with a gardening truck to pick you up, you don't really care what he thinks about you, what you look like, or how you talk.

The Kelly workers—the people who “want their lives to be normal,” who “want to get to know people”—are representative of the dedicated hard workers of the other interviews. They look to their jobs for meaning. In contrast, these alienated day laborers had little hope of realizing any career dreams they once may have had. Marked by a glaring lack of human or cultural capital that could be translated into good jobs, they realized their marginality to employers: only two were high school graduates, two were marked by histories of drug use, and one had a criminal record. These men were not seeking the social psychological rewards that motivated their better-endowed counterparts in the study. In fact, for one, liberation from the dream of career fulfillment was associated with blatant expressions of hostility:

There were twenty of us picking lemons and then I started it. I found a rotten lemon on the ground and I saw this guy working; he was working real hard. I hit him upside the head and the lemon splattered and then everyone started to throw lemons. We got fired, but we got four hours of work in.

Another time, his boss did not believe his claim that he had hurt his back:

The boss says, "I think you're faking it, I think you're full of shit. We don't need that around here, we only have professional people." And I'm looking at him [thinking.] Yeah, five bucks an hour; I'm real professional! Give me a break! Then I started smarting off, and next thing I know I picked him up and threw him against the wall and I said, "You think you're so big."

His examples were unusual. Among the rest of the sample, a worker would occasionally walk off the job and a few people took pleasure in breaking rules, but they generally muted their expressions of resentment.

Why did a member of the day laborer group adopt a fighting stance while the better-off, largely white-collar group members took an accommodationist one? I have argued that the latter have internalized a conception of middle-class respectability

as a key component of their identities that inhibits the formation of a critique, while the life experiences and labor market realities of the day laborers inure them to the call of respectability and shape their “nothing to lose” orientation. In short, the impetus for the accommodating stance among most interviewees to a large extent comes from their need to maintain a sense of self-worth and honor as core components of their identities. Further investigation into the role of identity work is likely to enhance understanding of workers’ willingness to labor as hard as they do under conditions of uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

Is it true, as the *Wall Street Journal* (Lancaster 1994) claims, that “the social contract between employers and employees, in which companies promise to ensure employment . . . is dead, dead, dead”? For their part, employers in this study made it perfectly clear to workers that the answer was yes, that the employers did not owe the workers anything beyond what was specified in the short-term contract, that training was unlikely and “brain-picking” acceptable, and that these workers were not members of the company family. This post-Fordist “we don’t owe you” ethos was captured symbolically by companies’ common practice of differentiating nonpermanent employees with “nonemployee” badges, which one worker reported made her feel “nonhuman.” For their part, it is not at all clear that contingent workers would answer the *Wall Street Journal’s* question affirmatively. That a group of workers so obviously treated as contract workers would subscribe nevertheless to the ideology and enact the behaviors specified by the old accord is surprising to employers, who do not expect it (Heckscher 1995). Indeed, because they expect unprofessional behaviors, employers typically enforce a more coercive policy on contingent workers than on permanent ones (Henson 1996; Parker 1994, Smith 1998). As the supports for being a dedicated worker are removed, we should expect to see an erosion of this ethic and the formation of a new orientation to work among individual workers. And yet for the most part we do not. Why?

At the social-psychological level, these workers—whose identity-management strategies successfully allowed them to avoid much of the shame associated with nonpermanent employment—were not motivated to rethink their ideological orientations. Those who defined their high work motivation as determinative of their personal value mitigated the need to rethink the basics of the employment contract. Similarly, workers who devised alternative occupations in which to ground their identities felt no need to question the larger terms of the employment relationship: their response, too, was an individual one that still enshrined an occupation as the source of personal validation. Workers who identified their interests with those of employers were also successful at warding off the stigma of a spoiled identity by thinking of themselves as associated with a nondespised group. In short, identity work allowed these workers to recast their identities without calling into question their orientation to the old employment accord.

The implications of this process transcend the social psychological, however: this identity work reproduces consent to the very work relations that created the need for identity-management strategies in the first place. This implication is reminiscent of the work of Burawoy (1979), who discussed the unintended social reproduction consequences of workers' "making out" strategies, and of Gecas and Schwalbe (1983:85–56), who noted that "the unintended consequences of competent performance is thus to re-create the conditions that limit possibilities for deriving self-esteem from it." The results presented here similarly show how consent to ongoing workplace social relations is forged and how doing so "reproduces capitalist relations of production that sustain the objective features of the workplace" (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983:85–86).

Why is the good worker orientation so tenacious? The data reported here point to possible components of an answer. We might speak at a general level of a cultural lag intertwined with barriers to mobilization and the lack of appeal of the available alternatives. Regarding cultural lag, the arrangement that drew worker and employer together in a particular bargain is only recently over. Changes in the opportunity structure do not necessarily mean that a person can readily change to fit new circumstances (Epstein 1992). According to Jackman:

A moral framework of long standing is hard to abandon: based in a long history of its past effectiveness, the patterns of thought have become habitual and ingrained. Thus, there is a natural lag between the morality that infuses people's orientations and the changed structural circumstances that make such a moral outlook anachronistic. A broad moral framework cannot be shed knee-jerk style with changed structural conditions; instead, its ineffectuality must be learned. (1994:87)

More specifically, the labor relations of Fordism may live on in the consciousness of workers trying to accommodate to the new "flexible" work relations. Contemporary work organizations "have been formed in the shadow of the Fordist tradition from which they trace their descent" (Vallas 1999:96), and that shadow is not easily dodged. It is difficult to rearrange one's personality to be tough and flexible enough to avoid dependence on an employer (Leinberger and Tucker 1991), especially since habits of responding are not surface level but function to stabilize one's identity.

The ability of workers to rethink their situations in structural terms depends partly on the presence of a movement that counters the managerial ideology. Because identity is not static but rather is a social process (Kunda 1992; Mead 1935) workers in contexts that offer realistic opportunities for organized resistance may be willing to adopt a union consciousness (Rogers 2000:125–26). Recent history offers examples of contingent workers' capacity for mobilization when presented with realistic alternatives.⁷ Some have organized into unions, as is the case for hundreds of traditionally hard-to-organize Web designers, technical writers, and software engineers in the Seattle area (including Microsoft; van Jaarsveld 2004). At the other end of the skills spectrum are New Orleans temporary garbage truck workers who gained contracts through the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)

(Cook 2000). Groups such as the National Alliance for Fair Employment (a coalition seeking to gain equal treatment for contingent workers) have sprung up nationwide, legislators at the federal and state levels have proposed initiatives to extend statutory protections to contingent workers, and litigation efforts are also under way, all pointing to the notion that contingent workers respond to alternative ideologies offering opportunities to improve their lives. Nonetheless, the impediments to organization are severe, and alternative frameworks for analyzing their experience are not readily available. Achieving self-understanding and self-realization requires questioning “the mandate to limit reflection, conceptualization, and communication” that constitutes the current metadiscourse surrounding the employment relationship (Rosenwald 1992:283).

Another possible reason that workers’ cling to the principles of the old employment bargain while employers do not is that the alternative vision of labor relations offered by “Me, Inc.” is not altogether appealing. What institutions are there to replace the sense of identity, exchange, and investment that workers enjoyed through their attachment to particular jobs (DiTomaso 2000; Smith 2001:9)? They are few. The world would be simpler if workers were the instrumental agents seeking personal gain that the business press and employers seem to assume they are. But most of the workers in this sample sought more from the employment relationship than a paycheck and a line on a résumé. The relationship between employer and employee under the old system was *personalized* to some degree, which humanized it (Earnest 1992; Jackman 1994; Littler 1990; Padavic and Earnest 1994). The old bargain had many downsides, but it brought workers some abridgment of their instrumentalized status as mere sellers of labor power. Because entering into an employment relationship characterized only by the buying and selling of labor power in a market can do nothing to further noneconomic goals, this lack of broader appeal may partly explain why workers fall back on old notions. These explanations are tentative. Interviews focusing on how workers conceive of their past and present employment relationships and how they envision better ones would contribute to the project of understanding the noninstrumental, identity-based rationales for consent.

I have used data from workers in a variety of contingent employment relationships to show how workers’ consent to this new form of unequal employment relations can be elicited and unequal work relationships obscured. In doing so, this research complements that of Smith (1998), who addressed a similar set of questions and analyzed the importance of instrumental motivations. By contributing to the understanding of noninstrumental rationales for consent, findings like those presented here may further understandings about how mobilization might be effected.

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NOTES

1. The key to the contingency of employment is that such workers cannot assume that their employment will continue (Kalleberg, Reskin, and Hudson 2000:259). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' broadest estimate includes "wage and salary workers who do not expect their employment to last" unless they choose to end it for personal reasons, the "self-employed . . . and independent contractors who expect to be and had been in their present assignments for less than 1 year," and temporary help and contract workers who "expect to work for the customers to whom they were assigned for one year or less" (Cohany et al. 1998:44).
2. Some elements of the bargain are richly documented in workplace ethnographies: Whyte (1956) excoriated the process by which the "organization man" must sacrifice his independence in order to become a team member; Mills (1951) described the "status panic" attendant to the prestige striving of managers; and Kanter (1993) showed how such closed, communal environments created counterproductive behaviors in women and men.
3. In the context of contingent employment, the term "employer" can have various meanings. Here the term denotes the de facto rather than the de jure employer and thus indicates the person or establishment making immediate use of the worker's labor and the setting where the worker performs the job; the term does not refer to the temporary agency or the hiring hall, even when it is the employer of record.
4. Analyses in this medium are generally nonempirical and are done by journalists, futurists, human relations consultants, and staffing industry experts (Kunda, Barley, and Evans 2002).
5. In a context broader than that of employment relations, social scientists have pointed to how power in general constrains the frameworks that subordinate groups can call on in making their judgments about equity. Various called "mobilization of bias" (Schattschneider 1960), "non-decision making" (Bachrach and Baratz 1970), and "constrained volitions" (Lindblom 1977), such frameworks point to dominant actors' subtle use of power to limit the consideration of alternatives. According to Jackman (1994:67), "By defining the bounds of reasonable discourse, institutionalized power limits the kinds of political exchanges that may take place without sully-ing the awareness of any of the participants."
6. Thinking of instrumentality at a psychological level implies another analysis. Acting on the belief that hard work pays off may reduce the anxiety inherent in uncertain employment conditions, as a reviewer pointed out. Carrying on as if hard work will result in permanent employment—maintaining faith in the Fordist-era notion that individual efforts get rewarded—may be an attempt to exert control over an essentially uncontrollable situation, thereby holding at bay the fear of permanent employment insecurity and keeping alive the hope that things will turn out all right.
7. Scholars have proposed new organizing strategies focusing on the particular social relations of production faced by contingent workers, such as occupational unionism (Cobble 1991) and building up the role of associational organizations, which would allow the substitution of a relationship to the profession for one with a specific employer (DiTomaso 2000; Heckscher 1995; Kanter 1993).

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