Temporary agency employees as outsiders: An application of Norbert Elias' established-outsider theory.

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Introduction

• Increase of temporary agency employment
• Problematic employment relations
• Negative impact on health and well-being
• Lack of research about origin of problematic employment relations
Research aims

• How poor day-to-day relations between agency workers and their permanent colleagues and client-employers arise
• How these poor relations are maintained by different mechanisms demonstrated in the established-outsider theory
Established-outsider theory

- Famous theory of sociologist Norbert Elias and John L Scotson
- Explains differences in power and rank between different groups in Winston Parva
- Figuration of established and outsiders
- Established: middle class neighbourhood + old working class neighbourhood
- Outsiders: new working class neighbourhood
Established-outsider theory

- Difference: time they lived in Winston Parva
- Established → sources of power: social cohesion, common way of life, same habits, key positions in the community
- Established think they are superior
- Exclude and stigmatise outsiders, e.g. gossip
- Outsiders: deviant behaviour (only small group), inferior self-image
- Theory can be applied to different contexts

→ This study: Temporary agency employment
Methodology: population and sampling

- 10 in-depth interviews in Flanders (Belgium)
- Employed in agency employment during the 2 years before the interview
- Preference for a permanent job
- Intensive experience with temporary agency employment:
  - More than a year
  - OR
  - More than 4 agency jobs
- Negative experiences
Methodology: instrumentation

- Semi-structured interviews
- Topic list
- Method: 2 stories
  - Labour history (~life course)
  - Typical working day

→ Probe into the various topics through the stories
→ Focus on perception, feelings, ...
Methodology: analyzing method

- Digitally recorded
- Verbatim transcribed
- Narrative perspective
- Coding inspired by established-outsider theory
Findings

• 3 Groups
  ▪ Temporary agency workers (outsiders)
  ▪ Established permanent workers
  ▪ Managers and supervisors of client-companies

• Findings
  1. How and why agency workers become outsiders
  2. Mechanisms to maintain the figuration
  3. Why they are stuck in their position
1. How and why agency workers become outsiders

- Cohesion and group charisma among perms – know each other for a long time
- Lack of cohesion among temps
- Temps don’t stand up for each other
  → *I’ve tried to protect the agency worker, but next to telling people to leave her alone, there wasn’t much I could do. I’ve also had to stand up for myself and had to defend myself. If they don’t... Well, you can’t keep on defending them. The job is hard and there’s bullies among them, and if you’re not able to defend yourself you’re never going to be able to hold on to a job. (Debby)*
- Competitors for gaining perm job
1. How and why agency workers become outsiders

- Perms have the most powerful positions in 2 ways
  - Temps: stupid, dull, tough, dirty or less interesting jobs
    ➔ So only the agency workers were tying up and the regulars were driving. And I used to tell them: "This is not right, I’ve been working here for six months and I also want to drive the fork-lift truck once in a while and not always have to do the tying up”. But it’s impossible to go against them. (Jason)
1. How and why agency workers become outsiders

- Positions of 'trade union representative' always for perms

  - I thought to myself: “The unions know what’s going on. It’s not like I’m an exception because so many people who are agency workers have the same experience. It’s not like I’m alone in this situation.” So the catholic, liberal and socialist unions all knew about this but failed to take action.

  **Interviewer:** Did you ever talk to them about this? All the time I told them that the situation was unacceptable. The union knows about this, but feels it’s incapable of doing something about it. (An)
2. Mechanisms to maintain the figuration

- Agency employees are considered as inferior
- Inferior naming
- Blame-gossip

→ Had this permanent colleague gone up to tell the boss that he had seen me using my cell phone, I would’ve been fired immediately, on the spot. Just because I confronted him! (Jason)
2. Mechanisms to maintain the figuration

• Exclusion from social activities
  → The others threw parties and you would hear rumours about them. Or they would go out for dinner together without you. And of course on Monday they would be talking about what had happened that weekend, even with the bosses.

  *Interviewer: And how did you feel about this?*

  I felt unaccepted, or at least, ‘less’ than them. They know you work there but you’re just a temporary worker, a bit like a throw-away product. (Mia)
2. Mechanisms to maintain the figuration

- Exclusion by the management

→ Company X, which is a world-wide company by now, handed out a little truck for Christmas which had a chocolate figure in it and three chocolate coins. They probably buy these by the hundred thousands, so for them the cost is minimal. There were signs saying that everyone could go collect their present, but the agency workers had to keep working. The present wasn’t for them. (Patrick)
3. Why they are stuck in their position

- Mechanisms of stigmatisation, gossip and exclusion + not finding a permanent job → low self-image
  → 'Am I not good enough for you? Do you think I’m inferior?' (Mia)
3. Why they are stuck in their position

• Obedience since they want a permanent contract

→ I recently read in a booklet the union gave me that according to the law we should be receiving food checks as well. So the company is legally not in order. But I’m not going to bother them about it because maybe they’ll see me as a difficult employee and they won’t want me back there again. To be honest, I used to demand that they should treat me correctly, but if you’ve been unemployed and have been working as an agency worker, you’re more alert about possible consequences; you learn to keep your complaints to yourself. (Olivia)
3. Why they are stuck in their position

- Frighten workers, so they stay obedient

→ If there was a strike they always used to threaten agency workers by saying that they weren’t allowed to strike and that if they didn’t show up for work because of a strike, it was very well possible that they weren’t allowed to come back the next week. They really threaten you, while normally, you have the right to strike. (Angela)
Conclusion

• Relevance of established-outsider theory to study employment relations of agency workers
Thank you for your attention!
Questions?
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