



Career pathways for temporary workers: Exploring heterogeneous mobility dynamics with sequence analysis



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ABSTRACT

Because temporary jobs are time-delimited, their implications for workers' economic security depend not only on their current characteristics, but also their place in longer-term patterns of mobility. Past research has typically asked whether temporary jobs are a bridge to better employment or trap workers in ongoing insecurity, investigating this question by analyzing single transitions. We demonstrate that this approach is ill-suited to assessing the often more complex and turbulent employment patterns characteristic of temporary workers. Our analysis instead employs sequence methods to compare a representative sample of temporary workers' month-by-month mobility patterns through 8 potential (non)employment states over five years. We derive a typology of trajectories and describe their relative precariousness in relation to employment stability and wage and earnings levels and growth. While some of the pathways correspond quite closely to frameworks used by past research, others reveal new and important distinctions. Multinomial logit models reveal job, employer, and worker characteristics associated with different pathways. Age, gender, and type of temporary work stand out as important factors shaping subsequent mobility patterns.

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1. Introduction

Temporary jobs are defined by their time-limited nature, but we know surprisingly little about their place in workers' longer-term employment trajectories. Some scholars posit that they create a useful bridge to permanent employment. To the extent that this is true, we can worry less about their typically poor employment characteristics, such as their low wages and reduced access to workplace benefits, statutory entitlements, and effective regulatory protections (Fuller, 2009; Fuller and Vosko, 2008; Gash and McGinnity, 2007; Lippel et al., 2011; Van Lancker, 2011; Vosko, 2009). Others however, paint a dim picture of entrapment in a "precarious jobs carousel" (Barbieri and Scherer, 2009) where workers cycle fruitlessly between bad and no jobs.

This argument has largely been tested by research analyzing single transitions from a given temporary job or between two time points, often in relation to one possible outcome. This approach has the virtue of straight-forward measurement and recourse to established methods with well-known statistical properties. It may not, however, adequately capture nuances important for understanding how mobility processes unfold or their implications, particularly when employment patterns are turbulent. Current labor market outcomes can be shaped by the longer-term impact of cumulative patterns

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of mobility (Fernandez Mateo, 2009; Fuller, 2008; Le Grand and Tahlin, 2002; Light and McGarry, 1998), highlighting the importance of considering potentially more complex trajectories as they evolve over time for temporary workers.

Our paper follows just such an approach, focusing attention on the pattern of employment histories subsequent to a temporary job over five years. We implement a method hitherto unexploited in work on temporary employment, sequence analysis (dynamic hamming matching and cluster analysis), to analyze month-by-month employment patterns for a representative sample of temporary workers in Canada and generate a typology of employment trajectories. To help make sense of the relationship of the resultant trajectories to workers' economic security, we compare their average income and wage levels and growth. Our analysis reveals important differences that cannot be encapsulated in a dichotomous bridge/trap conception of outcomes. In the second part of the analysis we employ multinomial logistic regression to describe differences in the types of workers and employment contexts associated with particular trajectories.

2. Temporary employment, the eroding standard employment relationship, and national institutions

Patterns of economic restructuring over the past several decades have raised concern about rising precariousness in employment (e.g. Barbieri, 2009; Kalleberg, 2009; Sennett, 2011; Standing, 2008; Vosko et al., 2009a,b). Globalization processes have increased international market competition and the pace of innovation, as well as employers' vulnerability to economic shocks occurring throughout the world (Blossfeld et al., 2011). The neoliberal politics of de/re-regulation, reconfiguration and privatization have meanwhile increased employer power vis-à-vis workers (MacPhail and Bowles, 2008). Emboldened, employers have been prompted to shift risks on to workers in the form of increased flexibility of various types (Barbieri, 2009; Blossfeld et al., 2011; Breen, 1997). Temporary employment contracts (alongside other trends such as subcontracting) have become one important employer strategy in this context, allowing employers to reduce their commitment to workers, potentially lower the wage and benefits bill, and adjust to rapidly fluctuating levels of demand (Arranz et al., 2010; Gash, 2008; Houseman, 2001; Olsen and Kalleberg, 2004; Smith, 2001; Von Hippel et al., 1997).

While structuring employment as temporary can be appealing to employers, for workers it potentially raises new social risks. The post-war male normative employment model of permanent, full-time dependent employment entailed a psychological contract between workers and employers coupled with important statutory protections and entitlements that ensured workers who fell under its ambit¹ a decent standard of living and relatively predictable career paths (Drobnic and Blossfeld, 2004; Isaksson et al., 2005; Kalleberg et al., 2000; Mückenberger, 1989; Standing, 2011; Vosko, 2009). Perhaps not surprisingly, the notion of "precariousness" has been taken up in a general way by activist groups in Europe as well as some theoreticians as characterizing a critical and wide-ranging societal shift (Bourdieu and Nice, 1998; Sennett, 2011; Standing, 2011; Vosko et al., 2009a). At the same time, more targeted empirical investigations challenge the assumption that changing employment relations can be understood in a fully coherent way. Indeed, the prevalence of temporary work and the degree to which it negatively impacts worker well-being differs substantially across national contexts (Barbieri, 2009; Isaksson et al., 2005; Vosko et al., 2009a,b). Ultimately, national institutions mediate the ways that workers and employers respond to the kinds of pressures that have increased market risks and accompanying demands for flexibility, as well as their potential consequences (Blossfeld et al., 2011; Davoine et al., 2008; DiPrete, 2002; DiPrete et al., 1997).

Canada is often classified with the United States and Britain as a "liberal" welfare state, or, in the varieties of capitalism framework, as an uncoordinated market economy (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Hall and Soskice, 2001). Firms in liberal (uncoordinated) market economies (LMEs) coordinate their activities mainly through competitive market relations. Thus, LMEs tend to demonstrate weaker institutional and regulatory employment structures, in comparison to strongly coordinated market economies, such as Germany (Hall and Soskice, 2001). These contextual differences potentially matter for temporary work. For example, like Britain and the USA, Canada has relatively lax employment protections for permanent employees (ranking third lowest among OECD countries in this respect, behind New Zealand and the USA, and just above the UK (OECD, 2013)), low union density (Jackson, 2009; OECD, 2014b), and high rates of low-wage work (LaRochelle-Côté and Dionne, 2009). These factors have all been associated with lower levels of temporary employment (Baranowska and Gebel, 2010; Hevenstone, 2010; Kahn, 2007; but see Cazes and Tonin, 2010). In addition, they make labour markets more fluid and open, theoretically lowering barriers that inhibit movement between employers overall and from temporary to permanent jobs in particular (Barbieri, 2009; Boeri, 2011; OECD, 2013). While the issue of temporary employment has attracted scholarly attention in liberal economies, it is typically seen as a less critical component of economic insecurity in these contexts than widening wage inequality (Barbieri, 2009; DiPrete et al., 2006).

Assumptions of a unified context for temporary work within broadly defined employment or welfare-state regimes, however, may gloss over important differences (for more general arguments about divergence within employment regimes see e.g. O'Connor et al., 1999; Schneider and Paunescu, 2012; Walker et al., 2014). Notably, Canada has substantially higher rates of temporary employment than both the United States or Britain – in fact, the incidence is close to the OECD average.² Canada differs from the US and UK in having a somewhat more regulated legal and institutional environment, and stronger coordination

¹ As Vosko (2009) makes particularly clear, the SER was always a limited model, defined as much by its (gendered and racialized) exclusions as inclusions. It would be a mistake to see the post-war period as a unalloyed "golden-age" of security (see also Standing, 2008).

² In 2005 (the last year with comparable data for the United States), temporary jobs comprised 29.9% of youth (15–24) employees in Canada versus 12.3% in the UK, 8.1% in the USA and 25.5% for the OECD as a whole. Among prime-aged (25–54) workers, the comparable figures were 9.3% for Canada, 4.3% in the UK, 3.5% USA, and 9.8% for the OECD (rates increased slightly in the UK and Canada by 2012 while holding largely steady in the OECD as a whole) (OECD, 2014a).

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