WORKING TEMP:

HOW TEMPORARY EMPLOYEES FIND MEANING

THROUGH LIFE COURSE NARRATIVES

BY

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WORKING TEMP:

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Abstract

Using qualitative interviews, I examine the way that workers contracted with temporary employment agencies make sense of their work lives. Temp work is structured and organized in such a way that leads to unstable and fragmented work experiences and often sporadic employment. In such conditions, traditional sources of meaning are often unavailable as the jobs held have little intrinsic value and temps are often socially isolated in the workplace. Yet the participants in this study did find their experiences as temps meaningful by symbolically connecting their work with experiences, roles, and relationships they had in their broader lives outside of work. Through what I refer to as life course narratives, participants created stories that explained how their temp work aided certain transitions they were experiencing in their lives. For some, temp work was part of the college experience and part of the process of finding their career jobs. For retirees, particular those who retired early, it was a way of transitioning into that new stage in their lives. For others, it was a means of recovering from some sort of personal or family tragedy and moving back into the normative trajectory of the life course. Minority participants in particular perceived temp work as a way of escaping lives in crisis. It was a viewed as a chance of escaping economic marginality born out of institutionalized forms of discrimination, the stigmatization of the black urban poor, and bad personal decisions. Others viewed temp work itself as a source of crisis that had derailed their lives in devastating ways.

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In Memoriam
Patricia Diane Zirkle
You are loved and missed.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

My father is a factory worker, or at least he was before he retired in 2009. For the past

thirty years of his working life, he was employed at the same company. This statement is not

simply a description of what he does, it is a description of who he is. It is as much a part of his

identity as his role as father or his status as widower are. It helps shape how he sees the world

and how he relates to other people. It is a source of community. His best friend is a fellow

retiree and his current partner is someone he was introduced to by another co-worker. Nearly

every time I visit him, he updates me on at least one member of the "old crowd." Yet the factory

he worked at for so many years has not hired a permanent worker in the last ten years. Some jobs

have been relocated to Mexico while others are cyclically filled with temporary workers that

never stay for more than three months.

This situation is not unique. In recent decades we have seen a dramatic increase in the

use of contingent labor, including temporary workers, or "temp workers" in the United States.

Within these new employment relations, workers are increasingly becoming disconnected from

the social relations at work, be that a shop floor or office suite, and as a result some may feel as if

they have been set adrift from what we have traditionally thought of as the processes through

which work takes on meaning and value. The motivation behind this dissertation is to gain

insight into how workers who find themselves in these situations make sense of their situations.

Is it a simple matter of reducing work to the barest pragmatic interest of a paycheck? Or do they

find new sources of meaning to find significance in their work. In the following chapters, I focus

on how a group of workers integrate their experiences with temporary employment into their

broader lives by creating what I refer to as "life course narratives" and in doing so construct their work as meaningful.

These narratives may take on a variety of forms. They may tell the story of transition, of moving into adulthood or of learning to adjust to retirement. They may take the form of the traditional stories of redemption, in which temp work comes to signify recovery from ill fortune, poor health, addiction, or debilitating accidents. They can take the form of the tragedy, in which temporary employment is presented as a root evil that has brought crisis to one's life. And finally, they may move beyond the story of one's life, but of the life of one's community. These narratives may signify a collective experience within which one's personal tale finds a voice. As with many of the minority workers who participated in this study with me, temp work may come to be viewed as an escape from a life in crisis, not just for an isolated individual, but for members of communities as a whole. Regardless of how these narratives begin, or where they may eventually conclude, they all share one common element. At some point in each of these stories, the teller walks through the doors of a temporary agency looking for a job.

Temporary work is becoming an increasingly important segment of the contemporary workforce. Some estimates suggest that as many as 30% of American workers are classified as "contingent workers," of which temps are one subcategory (Frenkel, 1999). Many economists have begun using shifts in temporary employment to predict overall economic trends as they contend that decreases in the number of positions held by temporary workers often foreshadow a more general economic downturn, and increases usually precede a period of economic growth (Aaronson and Rissman, 2004). At the same time, contingent work has received a great deal of attention among social scientists who have identified it as a key component in the broader shift

toward economic flexibility (Davis-Blake, 1993; Geary, 1992; Kalleberg, 2000).

Much of the literature in the area has focused on the structural analysis of temp work. This research has included the examination of the role of contingent work in the post-Fordist economy and the effects it has had on the organization of work. Others have focused on the dynamics of social inequality associated with temp work. Yet little research has been done regarding the cultural dynamics of temp work, or more specifically with issues of meaning and identity. Rogers (2000), in examining the gendered and racial dynamics of temp work, briefly discusses cultural forms of control used within firms using temp labor. Odih (2003) offers a social-psychological critique of temp work, arguing that it has resulted in the fragmentation of identity. Henson's (1996) ethnography includes a discussion of the organizational and cultural marginalization of temp workers who are perceived by themselves and their colleagues as "just temps."

The purpose of my dissertation is to examine and understand complex ways through which a group of temp workers hired through temporary employment agencies construct their work as meaningful. Data was collected through qualitative interviews with forty-five temp workers. My work, influenced by both critical and interactionist approaches to the study of the work world, frames work and nonwork as analytically distinct realms that are dialectically related and mediated. Thus, meaning found in work can be from either the intrinsic value of the work itself, or from the way that it is symbolically linked to experiences, roles, and relationships that exist outside of the workplace. Thus, work can be either *internally* or *externally* meaningful. From this question, a number of research questions emerge. How do the unique characteristics temporary employment, its flexibility and ancillary traits, alter the traditional means through

which meaning and identity are created? In the absence of intrinsic values of work, can work still be perceived as meaningful? What external factors shape how workers make sense of their work? How are these external factors integrated into their understanding of work? In this way, the proposed study not only contributes to the empirical examination of temp work, but also to the theoretical debate on the "nature" of work and identity.

Background and Theoretical Framework

In the following sections, I provide a brief history on the development of temporary employment in the US and a summary of the theoretical debates regarding the meaning and value of work. I then develop a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of life course narratives and a discussion of the research methods used.

The History of Temporary Employment and Its Agencies

In order to understand the personal stories of individual temp workers, we must understand the story of temporary employment in US society itself. In a sense, the history of temp work is a preface to the life course narratives created by those engaged in it. It is difficult to trace the history of contingent work in the US because it has tended to exist in the shadows of the stages of American industrialization and the creation of a "permanent" labor force (Barley and Kunda, 2004). Early industrialization efforts in both the US and Canada relied on the use of immigrant labor, a demand that lead to the development of the first private employment firms that were the predecessors of contemporary temporary employment agencies (Vosko, 2000). More recently, the flow of female workers into the paid economy during WWII and the image of "Rosie the Riveter" was a turning point, and source of ideological legitimation, of contingent work strategies (Kossoudji and Dresser, 1992).

The particular history of the temporary employment agencies in the US can be traced to the opening of Russell Kelly Office Services in October of 1946 (Kelly Services, 2011). Started by William Russell Kelly, the business originally provided inventory, copying and typing services to local firms in the Detroit area. Eventually clients approached him about having his clerical workers fill in when they were experiencing staffing shortages. Gradually the business evolved so that in-house clerical work was replaced with the exclusive contracting of workers to the offices of clients. Within this model, "Kelly girls" became contingent workers who covered short term staffing needs that resulted from sick leave, maternity leave, vacations, special projects, or simply busy seasons (Cohany, 1996). In 1954, a second office was opened in Louisville and the company's name was changed to Kelly Girls two years later. By the beginning of the shift to post-Fordist production strategies in 1969, Kelly Girls (now renamed Kelly Services) had 169 offices across the US.

The formative period of the temporary employment era was between the years 1946, when the first agency was founded, and 1970. It was during this time that "traditional" conceptions of temporary employment became established within US business culture. It was also during this period that many of the basic political and legal battles regarding temp work were waged and the institutionalization of temp work was achieved (Gonos, 1997). Of particular importance was the establishment of the legality of the "triangular employment relationship" (Cordova, 1986). In this relationship, agencies assign workers to contracting firms while maintaining workers on agency payrolls and remaining legally responsible as the "employer." This fracturing of the employment relationship is one of the key structural factors that shape the daily work experiences of temp workers. Yet such a transformation was not the benign result of

shifts in human resource strategies, but rather overt challenges to established regulatory practices embedded in New Deal politics that mandated certain obligations within the employer-employee relationship (Ricca, 1982).

Immediately following WWII, state governments acted swiftly to regulate the business activities of employment agencies, which were still legally defined as intermediaries and not employers. These efforts were reinforced by US Department of Labor initiatives and Supreme Court decisions (including *Olsen v. Nebraska, 1941*) (Gonos, 1997). Driven primarily by Manpower, Inc., a wave of lawsuits were filed challenging the regulatory authority of state governments. Although most of these cases resulting in rulings against temp agencies, *Florida Industrial Commission v. Manpower of Miami, 1956* did rule in favor of deregulation. Along with the IRS's decision to recognize agencies as "employers" for tax purposes, this court decision created enough ambiguity to open the door to increased lobbying efforts of the temp industry that would create fundamental changes in state legislation beginning in the early 1960's. Deregulation first took hold in New York, California, and Oregon and quickly swept through the rest of the country. In 1966, the industry established the National Association of Temporary Services (NATS), which serves as the lobbying body and industry watchdog remains a significant force in the national, state, and local politics of today (Lenz, 1994).

As the temporary help industry developed during these formative years, it was built primarily around clerical work and the use of female temp workers (Casey and Alach, 2004; Parker, 1994). The strong reliance on women allowed the industry to develop a particular rhetoric that offered it a certain amount of social legitimation that paralleled the political legitimation they were achieving through lobbying and lawsuits. Temp workers were presented

as housewives looking to supplement the family income, or housewives unsure of their marketability or desire to work and using temp work as a tentative step back into the formal economy (Parker, 1994). Combined with the notion first established by William Russell Kelly that temp workers "covered" for absent permanent workers, the image of the working housewife constructed temp work as voluntary and as a supplement to (rather than replacement of) permanent jobs. While industrial work has always represented a smaller percentage of temporary positions, a parallel social construction occurred during these early decades. Racial and ethnic minorities, particularly African Americans, have historically been disproportionately represented among the ranks of temporary workers. As such, some researchers and some temporary agencies have argued that disadvantaged workers gain unprecedented access to the paid economy through temporary help agencies (ABU, u.d.; Anderssen, et al., 2009; Lane et al., 2003). Temp work therefore became identified in particular gendered and racial ways, and these notions were used by the industry to position itself as a legitimate presence within the US economy.

In the last several decades, we have seen a dramatic change in the organization of capitalist economies, and a corresponding change in the organization of work. The impetus for such change was the economic crisis of the late 1960's and early 1970's that highlighted the limitations of Fordism. A number of social and economic theorists, both neoliberal and neo-Marxist, have argued that Fordism entailed a number of rigidities that functioned well enough when US firms faced little competition in the global market (Applebaum, 1994; Castells, 2000; Harvey, 1990). When countries such as Japan and West Germany developed into economic powers, many US companies proved incapable of effectively responding to the increased competition and changes in the market. Strong unions, relatively high wages, quality benefit

packages, and large numbers of permanent workers hampered the response of US businesses to the recession. In response to the rigidities associated with labor, employers increasingly used more flexible labor strategies (Castells, 2000; Harvey, 1990).

Within this new economic climate, the flexibility offered by the temporary service industry became an attractive option for US businesses. The deregulation of the industry allowed client firms to escape the obligations associated with New Deal politics and the paternalism of Fordist labor strategies. Because of the triangular relationship in which only the agency is recognized as an employer, client firms are able to circumvent most of the worker rights laws that govern dismissals and can terminate workers at will. Client firms are also able to increase wage flexibility by decreasing the amount of capital tied up in labor contracts since payments are strictly to agencies on an as needed basis. Furthermore, temporary employment provides firms with a strategy to evade the efforts of organized labor. For example, in 2004 the National Labor Relations Board ruled that temp workers do not have the right to unionize (National Labor Relations Board, 2004). This ruling contains two separate components. First, temporary workers are not allowed to become members in, or participate in the activities of unions with workers at client firms. Second, temporary workers are not allowed to unionize independently and bargain collectively.

Because of the added flexibility temporary labor provides, many experts in business management, economics, and sociology have argued that it is a viable strategy of protecting firms from market insecurity, though it is accomplished by passing the risks onto employees (Rogers, 2000; Vosko, 2000). Employers are able to hire additional temp workers during periods of high demand. During periods where the market is sluggish, these workers can then be let go in order

to minimize labor costs (Adler and Adler, 2003, 60). The benefits of temporary labor go beyond the weak ties that exist between workers and client firms. Most contingent workers earn less than full/time, permanent workers. They typically receive fewer, if any benefits such as health insurance and pension programs. Furthermore, firms are not responsible for paying payroll taxes for temp workers and independent contractors. Thus, even when demand for a firm's product is at its peek, employers who use contingent workers have significantly lower labor costs than if they used permanent employees (Barley and Kunda, 2004; Kalleberg, 2001).

The benefits associated with contingent labor lead to an explosion in its use as American firms struggled to cope with the new economic realities of the post-Fordist era. The pervasiveness of this shift is somewhat difficult to measure as there is still debate on what types of employment are "contingent" (Kalleberg, 2000, p. 342). Definitions of contingent work typically include some combination of part-timers, casuals, fixed-term contract staff, temporaries, subcontractors, seasonal workers, and day laborers (Adler and Adler, 2003; Cassirer, 2004; Harvey, 1990; Valenzuela, 2003). Yet specific conceptualizations can vary dramatically. Part/time work is generally classified as contingent work. However, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in the 1990's, contingent employment made up roughly 13% of US employment (Barley and Kunda, 2004). Yet in 1993, part/time employment made up either 17.5% (Frenkel, 1999) or 19% (Kalleberg, 2000) of all employment. Current estimates of the number of workers contracted specifically through temporary employment agencies is roughly 3% (Van Arsdale, 2008). Since the mid-90's, Manpower has claimed to be the largest employer in the US (Manpower, 2007). Regardless of the debate on the extent of the use of flexible labor, three generalizations can be made. First, a significant portion of Americans is employed in

contingent work. Second, the number has increased since the early 1980's. And third,

professionals are increasingly among the ranks of the contingently employed (Barley and Kunda,

2004).

The Intrinsic Value of Work, Identity, and the Effect of Flexibility

At the center point of this study is the issue of the meaning of work. The word

"meaning" itself is vague, and my use of the term is aimed at encompassing a broad set of issues

that relate to issues of work values and identities. To this extent, my work is addressing and

moving beyond two particular conceptualizations of meaning, Marxian/neo-Marxian and

constructionist approaches, both of which define the work itself or the social relations of work as

the source of meaning.

The Marxian and neo-Marxian approaches to the meaning of work heavily focus on the

notion of "self actualization" and "alienation" (Braverman, 1974; Marx, 1964; Rinehart, 1987;

Sennett, 1998). From this perspective, self actualization is the process through which one's

potential and capability is realized. Key to this notion is that one's labor, through the creation of

object, is the primary means of achieving self actualization, because one's ego, one's self, can be

seen within item produced (Braverman, 1974; Marx, 1977). The capacity of labor itself and its

products that are meaningful because it is through this labor that identity is constructed.

Capitalism as a system has the effect of alienating workers from their labor, curtailing human

capacity for self actualization. Alienation, from this perspective, is not simply a psychological

condition but a social dynamic of the organization of labor that ultimately separates the

individual from what Marx (1964) referred to as their "species essence," that is their individual

human capabilities and their place within the entirety of humanity.[1] Alienated labor offers little

in terms of developing "physical and mental energies," but leaves workers "physically exhausted

and mentally debased" (Marx, 1977, p. 173).

Constructionist perspectives place less significance on the objective labor performed, but

instead focuses on the social relations through which shared meanings develop.[2] One theoretical

perspective that attempts to understand the role of work culture in the construction of shared

meanings can be found in the work of Fine (1996, 2006). Fine argues that workers actively

participate in creating their work lives through the negotiation of structural, cultural, and

organizational constraints. The product of these negotiations are distinct "idiocultures" that

denote the shared meanings created in particular workplaces (Fine, 1996). From this perspective,

it is the social relations of work, and not the work itself, that is the cornerstone of the meaning of

work and work identity.

With the cultural turn in the sociology of work, critical theory, including neo-Marxism,

has also turned an analytical eye toward the issue of work culture and its role in shaping the value

of work. One of the major blind spots of constructionist approaches to work culture is that there

is little room to recognize issues of conflict, coercion, or the differential capacity of groups to

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[1]Alienation is realized through production regimes in which the production processes workers engage in, the products they create, and the social relations they engage in become divorced from their "nature" (Marx, 1977).

[2]Social constructionism was first introduced by Berger and Luckmann (1966). They argue that reality is constructed out of subjective experiences that are expressed socially (p. 30). Social activity guided by these shared experiences can become habitual. In turn, these patterns of behavior are both externalized through processes of objectification, and internalized through socialization (p. 61). An institutional logic is then constructed in order to "make sense" of these patterns, both between people within a given institutional context, and within the individual over time (p. 93).

shape structure and influence culture. Critical perspectives on work culture, on the other hand,

tend to focus on the power dynamics of work culture (or at least the class dynamics). Popular

arguments with in this vein include Edwards' (1979) conceptualization of modern bureaucratic

forms as means of engineering work culture,[3] Rosen and Baroudi's (1992) notion of "ideational"

control, Rogers' (2000) theory of "discursive" control, or the concept of "cultural" control as

developed by Thompson and Findlay (1999) and Thrift (1999). The core idea behind all of these

perspectives is that new techniques have been developed aimed at justifying the organization of

work at an ideological level by dictating organizational values (Rosen and Baroudi, 1992). The

new wave of workplace control, then, is aimed at controlling the labor process by controlling the

meaning of work and managing work identity.[4]

Critical work in the vein of Edwards (1979) has been highly influential in the

examination of interactions within the workplace. But it has also received a great deal of

criticism. One critique has been that it uses a rigidly deterministic, economic logic that lacks the

ability to adequately account for the role of conscious class struggle (Clawson and Fantasia,

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[3]Edwards (1979) argues the advantage that modern bureaucratic forms have over other regimes of control is its ability to engineer workplace cultures that are more representative of the firm than of the workers (p. 148). In previous regimes, he argues, there was a certain amount of "breathing space" where workers could create and express their own culture. However, within more bureaucratic organizations, incentives and sanctions are used to encourage workers to adopt values and behaviors more desirable to the firm (p. 149).

[4]The issue of discursive control has been central in the criticism of "participative" work arrangements. Rather than breaking down traditional hierarchies of authority, critics argue that participatory rhetoric has only obscured existing power structures (Altman and Deiss, 1998; Blum, 2000; Ezzy, 2001). Likewise, Sewell and Wilkinson (1992) argue that JIT/TQC regimes help create organizational cultures in which employees are encouraged to engage in discipline (both of the self and of co-workers) and create normative structures that reify organizational goals (p. 271). Yet at the same time, these workers are still integrated into a larger vertical system of control based on surveillance and power/knowledge (p. 285).

1983; Gartman, 1983).[5] Part of the explanation for this rigid view of worker agency is the tendency of Marxist theory to work from the top down. Braverman (1974), Burawoy (1979), and Edwards (1979) each start their programs by identifying the existing social order, and then deduce the social phenomena through which it is realized. As a result, conceptions of organizational culture and the creation of the "good worker" are determinant, rather than emergent. This is in stark contrast to the analytical program of social constructionism. Social constructionists use inductive analytical frameworks that capture a wide range of social behaviors. As Jacobs (1994) argues, workers create meaning through the totality of their work experiences. Much of the work day comprises trivia that workers take for granted. What usually gets labelled as "important events" by both sociologists and the workers themselves are usually those things that occur irregularly or that go wrong (Friedman, 1996). Yet if culture and identity are socially emergent, then "normalcy" and the mundane details of everyday life cannot be ignored (Quinney, 1998).

For both critical and social constructionist theorists, the study of organizational culture is of such keen interest because of its influence over worker character and identity. Yet, the two paradigms approach this topic in significantly different ways. Social constructionists, such as Hughes (1958), have conceptualized identity as emergent. Identity is not a pre-existing

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[5]Though workers' agency is not necessarily absent, it is often rendered a social abstraction that furthers the greater narrative of the development of capitalism. In Edwards' (1979) analysis, there is a conception of class struggle and workers' agency as contradictory to capitalist prerogatives. Nevertheless, worker agency (and the organized response to it by capitalists) is still conceived as a driving force behind the transformation from competitive to monopoly capitalism. As a result, those workplace interactions that further this march of history are often the only ones analyzed. The rest of the social world of the workplace is unaccounted for in these analyses.

construct, but is born out of the specific social relations in which one is engaged (Evans, 2000).

On the other side of the spectrum, structural Marxists argue that identity is realized. Each

individual has the inherent capacity to achieve full human potential. The issue is whether the

social relations of a given system will facilitate or stunt one's moral development. Social

constructionists are weary of such conceptions because they rely on philosophical abstractions

and hypotheticals.[6]

The differing approaches to the issue of identity by these two broad perspectives have

resulted in substantially different conclusions on the effect of post-Fordist, postmodern labor

arrangements, though both are typically critical of these systems. Neo-Marxist arguments tend to

echo that put forward by Sennett (1998), who argues that post-Fordist labor arrangements which

emphasize flexibility further "corrode" workers' character, setting them adrift without any

connection to the traditional values and moral structures of unalienated labor. Temporary

employment in particular has been criticized for exaggerating the alienating tendencies of

capitalism to an even greater degree. Critics argue that temporary labor arrangements are

organized around daily regimes that structure work in ways that are often alienating and offer

little to workers in terms of self-actualization (Bjorkquist and Kleinhesselink, 1999; Boyce, et.

al., 2007; Rogers, 1995). From such critical perspectives, temporary employment intensifies the

extent to which workers become separated from the production process, the goods and services

produced through their labor, the social relations of production and ultimately from themselves

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[6]Many feminists have offered a different critique. The conception of identity based on involvement in the paid economy is excessively reductionist, and excludes other social spheres through which identity (and work identity) can be constructed (including within the family) (Hochschild, 1997, p. 35).

and their human potential. It has characteristics that often minimize the integration of temps into

the workplace, including the brevity and instability of employment (LaRue and Vezina, 2007;

Nollen, 1996). Furthermore, many workers find themselves segregated within the production

process as they are assigned to perform "low" tasks (Henson, 1996; Vosko, 2000).

Constructionist critiques of postmodern forms of production argue that flexibility and

contingency may have deconstructed certain types of identities, but have also created new sets of

social relations through which new types of identities are created (Jensen and Westenholz, 2004).

Instead of the "citizen within the company," there are "insecure temp workers," and "high-skilled

free agents" (Jensen and Westenholz, 2004, p. 2). Traditional organizational boundaries that

define "internal" and "external" are blurring, as work associations span beyond and between

organizational boundaries (Jensen, 2004, p. 72). However, even among constructionists there are

varying interpretations of the quality of these new identities. Some argue that such identities

enhance individualism, and therefore empower creative expression (McFall, 2004, p. 28). Others

argue that such identities increase insecurity and vulnerability to external forces (such as political

pressures placed on journalism professionals) (Ursell, 2004, p. 42). Regardless of which stance

is ultimately taken, there is a shared agreement that the new economy has not resulted in the

destruction or degradation of identity.

Theoretical Framework

One of the prevailing themes in the discourses discussed in the previous section is the

mourning of the loss of "career" jobs. The shift toward the flexible labor arrangements

embedded in post-Fordist work structures and trumpeted by neoliberal ideologues has resulted in

unstable and fragment work histories and either corroded or transformed the traditional or even

idealistic meanings of work. While these critiques provide important insights into contemporary labor arrangements, they do not provide an adequate understanding of how workers I talked to experience temp work. The picture is incomplete. Work is not rendered meaningless as a mechanical outcome of contingency. Even in instances in which the work performed has been significantly degraded by this transformation, its meaning is contingent on a variety of internal and external factors.

In order to understand the contingent nature through which meaning is constructed, I use the concept of the *life course narrative.* I use it to refer to the ways in which workers create meaning in their work by symbolically connecting their experiences as temps to other experiences, roles, and relationships that are part of their broader lives.   Such a conceptualization of *sense making* is not a counter argument to the critical and constructionist approaches discussed in the previous section. Rather it acts to supplement such arguments, even using key insights generated from them as contexts for understanding how life course narratives create meaning.

The idea that work can become meaningful as a result of experiences outside of the workplace does require certain theoretical reconceptualizations. Rather than viewing work as an analytically distinct realm independent from nonwork experiences, I argue that work and non-work, while being analytically distinct, are dialectically related and mediated. As such, work has the potential for both *internal* and *external* meanings. Workers may find significance in their work through the qualities of the work itself or through the social interactions they engage in while on the job. But they may also find significance through how they associate their work experiences with things that are going on in their lives.

The sociological examination of the use of narratives can be traced to Mead's (1932) *Philosophy of the Present*, in which he argues that meaning is an interpretive process in which we never fully understand the significance of our actions in the immediate circumstance. Only after the fact do we retroactively frame what we experienced. The stories that we create during these interpretive processes are what I refer to as a *narrative*. More specifically, narrative refers to, in some sense, a constructed sequence of connected events (Franzosi, 1998; Toolan, 1988). Furthermore, the use of narratives, or what Warren and Messinger (1988) refer to as "sad tales," may function in a "reparative" way as they attempt to explain circumstances that stigmatize the self.[7] Finally, Norrick (1997) argues that among the functions of social narratives is the ratifying of group membership and the conveying of values. In this way, life course narratives are the stories temp workers construct to retroactively reorganize their life experiences to explain why they are engaged in temporary employment and frame the value of their work within the context of broader life experiences, even in situations where the internal meaning of work has been significantly degraded.

Narratives are not simply personal stories. They are cultural paradigms and structures which provide "master frames" through which the personal can be understood (Maines, 1999). As such, the life course narratives created by temp workers are embedded both within the context of the structure and organization of temporary employment, but also the structures and normative expectations of the life course. As a sociological concept, the life course is used to illuminate the

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[7]Warren and Messinger (1988) look specifically at the use of sad tales by mental patients to reconstruct their biography to fit the social values of society and buffer the moral judgments attached to stigmatized selves. Rothman and Gandossey (1982) examined the ways white-collar defendants used stories to mediate the effects of their crimes and gain more positive evaluations from parole officers.

interplay between structural dynamics and personal experiences as we age (Bruckner and Mayer, 2005; Elder, 1975; Heinz and Kruger, 2001; Hogan, 1978). Life course studies, by their nature, uncover the patterns that appear as people progress through identifiable life stages and illustrate the social forces that contribute to, or cause people to diverge from, these expected progressions (Elder, 1998; Hogan, 1978). Life course narratives, then, can be understood as the attempts by individuals to make sense of these structural realities that they may only partially perceive in ways that are personally meaningful.

The focus of this dissertation is on understanding the life course narratives of temp workers that frame temporary employment as a means of transitioning between stages of the life course or within the context of recovering from deviations from normative life course trajectories. Particular attention is paid to the transition from young adulthood to adulthood and the transition into retirement. Further attention is paid to the occurrence of life crises that disrupt one's progression through the life course, including the systematic crises experienced by members of minority communities. Young adulthood is increasingly defined by the requirements of higher education (Elder, 1998; Langenberg, et al., 2006; Lynch, 2003). Retirement has its own sets of structural dynamics, as does the increasingly common occurrence of early retirement (Han and Moen, 1999; Kim and Devaney, 2005; Shultz, et al., 1998). A number of researchers have also addressed the implications of divergences from normative life course stage progressions (London and Wilmoth, 2006; Maier and Lachman, 2000; McLaughlin and Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Sweeting and West, 2008). While studies such as Pettit and Western (2004) typically focus on the social or community consequences of life course disruptions, these consequences are the ripple effects of the experiences of individuals, and elicit personal responses. It is at this focal

point where this notion of a life course narrative is located.

The category of "young adult" has become recognized as an important stage within the life courses of contemporary industrialized societies (Elder, 1975; Rindfus, 1991; Shanahan, 2000). It represents a key transition within one's life in which new roles and responsibilities are adopted and old familial supports, while not necessarily disappearing, are stripped back or redefined. This transition from dependence to independence, from restriction to responsibility, occurs within particular structural realities which shape the ways in which individuals manage their personal journeys into adulthood (Rindfus, 1991; Shanahan, 2000). Attending college has become one of the dominate features of this stage of the life course, introducing a particular set of structural and organizational realities that must be negotiated (Shanahan, 2000, p. 668). College is an increasingly important component in functionally transitioning through the life course (Elder, 1998; Langenberg, et al., 2006; Lynch, 2003), yet students must be able to meet the economic demands of paying for their education and supporting themselves at the same time that they manage the time constraints of a class schedule, unpaid internships, and the like. Within this context, life course narratives of temp workers can be understood as attempts to balance the competing demands of work and school and rendering work meaningful through its relation to the transition from young adulthood to middle-age.

Retirement, in turn, marks the arrival of a new stage in the life course defined by its own particular structures and cultural expectations (Atchley, 1982; Han and Moen, 1999; Uhlenberg, 1992). These structural dynamics have created a contradiction in which competitive labor markets have increased both retirement and the economic marginalization of retirees (Treas and Bengtson, 1982; Uhlenberg, 1992), increases in life expectancy and health has resulted in an

elderly population with the resources and abilities to continue to make significant contributions to the society (Han and Moen, 1999; Moen, 2003).

Despite the creation of a "normative retirement regime" during the Fordist era, recent decades has seen retirement itself become "deinstitutionalized" or "destandardized" as the actual age range of retirement has expanded (Guillemard and Rein, 1993; Guillemard and van Gunsteren, 1991).[8] By 1990, fewer than 40% of workers moved directly into full retirement. Most workers engage in some combination of partial retirement, early retirement, or reverse retirement (Ruhn, 1990). Like more traditional retirement forms, these types of retirement are shaped by a variety of factors, many of which lie beyond the control of any particular worker. Economic factors play a primary role in the decision of early retirement (Bazzoli, 1985), though a variety of push and pull factors also influence the decision, including health and interest in leisure (Shultz, et al., 1998). Partial retirement is also effected by broad social forces, including labor markets, pension policies, and agism, that are antagonistic toward continued labor participation by retirees (Gustman and Steinmeier, 1984; Kim and Devaney, 2005; Latulippe and Turner, 2000). The life course narratives of retirees who engage in temp labor can be understood as their attempts to understand not only their work experiences, but the particular shared experiences of retirement, or in some cases early retirement.

The interplay between the life course and work experiences as previously described

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[8]Multiple factors have been identified as influencing these changes, including post-Fordist restructuring and downsizing using incentives to increase early retirement. An increased emphasis on individualism has also shifted the balance between biography and history. Idiosyncratic aspects of the individual's life fractures the structural imperatives of retirement resulting in a wider range in retirement age and variations in retirement forms, including partial and early retirement (Han and Moen, 1999).

emphasized the dynamics through which notions of temp work can be constructed positively. A key part of my argument is that the intersection of work and non-work experiences is emergent and therefore perceived as either positive or negative. In order to analyze this dynamic, I rely on literature on the life course that focuses on the effects of the disruption of normative life course progressions.   The general conclusions of these studies are that disruptions within the life course often have detrimental effects on individuals, family, communities, and society as a whole.[9] Along with divorce and incarceration (Hughes and Waite, 2009; Maier and Lachman, 2000; Massoglia, 2009; Previti and Amato, 2003; Uggen and Wakefield, 2005; Western, 2006), sickness, disability, drug addiction, military service, and even family tragedies can alter normative life course trajectories (Hogan, 1978; London and Wilmoth, 2006; Maier and Lachman, 2000; McLaughlin and Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Shanahan, 2000; Sweeting and West, 2008).[10]

As Reynolds and Turner (2008) argue, a crisis in one's life "is characterized by instability and ambiguity with respect to one's perceived capacity to deal with the event" (p. 225). Within this context, life course narratives may be created in order to make sense of temp work as recovery from some crisis, such as sickness or an accident, that has caused some sort of

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[9]Parents and children who go through divorce often experience interpersonal and socioeconomic troubles that have lasting impacts throughout their lives (Cherlin, et al., 1998; Hughes and Waite, 2009; Previti and Amato, 2003; Ross and Mirowsky, 1999). Incarceration not only effects the long term life chances of inmates, but also destabilizes families and entire communities, potentially for generations (Massey, 1993; Nagin, Farrington, and Moffitt, 1995; Pettit and Western, 2004; Western, 2006).

[10]Disruptions in the life course also have a number of potential consequences, including poor mental and physical health, stunted occupational advancement and income growth, delayed marriage, and unstable family lives (Hughes and Waite, 2009; London and Myers, 2006; McLaughlin and Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Reynolds and Turner, 2008; Western, 2002).

instability. On the other hand, due to the instability typically associated with temporary employment, narratives may focus on the role of temping in causing a life crisis itself. Because of the dialectical relationship between work and nonwork experiences, narratives can develop which make sense of work by relating it to one's broader life (i.e., temping as crisis recovery) or that make sense of one's life by relating it to their work (i.e., temping as crisis).

The issue of life course disruptions and life crises is perhaps most pertinent in understanding the experiences of minority temp workers and minortiy communities in general. In response to the structural inequalities that racial and ethnic minorities experience, minority temp workers often construct life course narratives that frame temp work as an escape from economic marginality. Racial stratification in US society has resulted in the life courses of a disproportionate number of African Americans being disrupted by such factors as unemployment, poor education, incarceration, and poverty. Simultaneously, blacks have historically comprised a disproportionate number of the temporarily employed. Through the analysis of life course narratives created by black temp workers, we can gain insights into the ways through which African Americans negotiate these realities and articulate the way they experience these connections.

Following slavery, roughly 80% of African Americans remained concentrated in the rural south, and trapped in a set of institutionalized set of relations that perpetuated economic and social inequalities. Blacks were largely excluded from nonmanual occupations and skilled trades, and forced to rely on low-skill and agricultural work that provided limited income and little chance for upward mobility (Massey and Denton, 1993). In the first half of the 20th century, blacks migrated north in large numbers, but remained economically marginalized through a

variety of racist social practices and became concentrated in urban cores devoid of meaningful

economic opportunities (Avila, 2004; Frey, 1979). The 1940's brought significant improvements

to blacks in terms of occupational opportunities (though less so than whites). Relative inequality

between blacks and whites increased, but African Americans were better off in absolute terms

(Fossett, et al., 1986). In the 1950's, inequality in wage structures began to decrease in non-

South areas, but continued to increase in the southern states. Starting in the 1960's and continuing

into the 1970's, wage inequalities decreased significantly in all regions of the U.S. (Fossett, et al.,

1986). However, minority poverty became increasingly concentrated beginning in the '70's as a

result of local and national attempts to address inner city poverty and decay (Massey, 1993;

Schill and Wachter, 1995). By the 1980's the rate in decline in inequality in occupational and

wage structures slowed drastically (Carlson, 1992).

The concentration of racial and ethnic minorities, particularly African Americans, in

impoverished urban areas has sparked a tense debate among social theorists regarding the social

and moral consequences of poverty and segregation. One of the earliest attempts at

understanding the intersection of structural inequality and culture emphasized what became

known as the "culture of poverty." Originally the culture of poverty was a concept conceived by

Lewis (1959) as a response to chronic unemployment and lack of upward social mobility. Lewis

identified more than seventy characteristics that he associated with this subculture, including the

lack of impulse control, instant gratification, and low self worth. Combined, these values and

orientations, he argued, act to reproduce and legitimate existing structures of inequality.[11]

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[11]Within both scholastic and popular discourse, the structural causality fundamental to
Lewis's theory was de-emphasized and replaced with the notion that the culture of poverty itself
was the reason for the perpetuation of economic inequality experienced within impoverished

Within this vein of examination, Massey and Denton (1993) refined Lewis's original concept and located it within a broader discussion of the racial ordering of society and space. This concept of the "culture of segregation" focused on a broader discussion of social exclusion, though the issue of economic inequality was still intimately related. This conception of the racial landscape is closely related to Omi and Winant's (1986) theory on "racial projects" in which emergent notions of race are organized and used to divide resources according to these constructed racial divides. Massey and Denton argue that the resulting segregation creates the "structural conditions for the emergence of an oppositional culture that devalues work, schooling, and marriage and that stresses attitudes and behaviors that are antithetical and often hostile to success in the larger economy" (p. 8).

Other research has focused on the role of the criminal justice system and the effects of criminal records in limiting African Americans' access to the formal economy and disrupting the regular progression through the lifecourse. The stigmatizing effects of a criminal record has been identified by many sociologists as being a significant factor not only when examining unemployment and poverty rates, but also criminal recidivism rates (Blau and Beller, 1992; Kerley, et al., 2004; Spohn and Holleran, 2000; Western, 2006). Western (2006) argues that such

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communities. In its new form, the theory quickly fell out of favor among many sociologists who argued that it had become a politicized means of blaming the poor for the limitations of capitalism (Gorski, 2008; Lamont and Small, 2008). Rather, than examining the role of economic structures in creating such a culture, the culture of poverty became a means to attack the social welfare system as a political program that allowed such a culture to persist. Yet a fundamental question remains; one that is directly related to the issues being dealt with in this dissertation. What is the moral impacts of economic marginality and instability? The racialization of poverty and space has clear material consequences, but its impacts go beyond purely physical hardships. It breaks people down mentally and emotionally. It effects how people see themselves and how they see the world around them (DeCarlo Santiago, et al., 2011).

stigmatization has a particularly damaging effect on young, impoverished black men. As a result

of incarceration, African-American men experience a 12.4% drop in hourly wages and a 36.9%

drop in annual income (Western, 2006, p. 119).[12] Such economic struggles have a ripple effect

throughout the life course of individual African Americans and within minority communities as a

whole. Incarceration delays marriage, contributes to a growing number of single parent

households, and ultimately increases reliance on public aid programs (Bures, 2009; Huebner,

2005; Western, 2006). These personal struggles in return effect the stability of minority

communities (Clear, 2007; Western, 2006). These troubles are then exacerbated by popular and

academic notions of African Americans such as "welfare mothers" and "deadbeat fathers" that

present blacks as bad parents that need to be controlled (Curran and Abrams, 2000; Jarrett, 1996;

Mink, 2001; Misra, et al., 2003; Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001; Seccombe, et al., 1998).

It is within this context that the often times contradictory role of temporary employment

within the African-American population can be understood. African Americans are

disproportionately more likely than whites to work as temporaries (Anderssen et al., 2008;

Heinrich et al., 2007) . In particular, former inmates may turn to the secondary labor market to

secure access to the formal economy. As such, temporary employment may be framed as

positive or functional. However, Western (2006) identifies the reliance on secondary labor

markets as a primary factor in the wage gap between African Americans who have been

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[12]Part of this reduction is the result of the degradation of work skills that typically occurs over extended periods of incarceration. Yet much of the economic losses experienced by black ex-convicts is tied to the social dynamics of stigma. Unable to find stable employment, many former prisoners are funneled toward the secondary labor market (including temporary employment) in which they experience sporadic employment and stagnant wages (Western 2006, p. 125).

incarcerated and those who have not (p. 124). Furthermore, since the early 1990's, roughly two-thirds of minority temp workers have failed to find stable, permanent employment (Van Arsdale, 2008). The habitual use of temp work also has the long term effect of stagnating wage growth, since temp workers have no opportunities for promotion or raises and instead perpetually cycle through a series of low paying jobs (Western, 2006). By focusing on the types of life course narratives African Americans articulate, we can begin to understand how these contradictory experiences are mediated and meaning is constructed.

In summary, the focus of this study is to understand the ways in temp workers use life course narratives to make sense of their work lives by symbolically linking them to relationships, roles, and experiences that are part of their nonwork lives. Through the creation of life course narratives, individuals are able to understand experiences that are shaped by broad structural dynamics in personally meaningful ways. In terms of temporary employment, these narratives may allow temps to come to terms with the unstable, fragmented, and sporadic nature of the work. Yet these narratives are connected to experiences outside of temp work and are therefore also shaped by the structural dynamics of the life course. Some narratives may be shaped by the particular dynamics of young adulthood, while others are shaped by the realities of retirement. Some narratives identify temping as a means of recovery from particular crises that have disrupted the normative progression through the life course, while others my construct it as the source of disruptions. Finally, temp work may be articulated within narratives as an escape by minorities from discrimination that systematically disrupts the life course and reinforces their economic marginalization.

Methods

The primary data for this study was collected through in-depth qualitative interviews with workers currently or recently employed through general-trade temporary staffing agencies. "General trade" refers to those temporary employment agencies that focus primarily on low-skilled manufacturing and office work. Three of the participants had also worked for more specialized agencies, two for a firm that placed registered nurses in temp positions and the other had worked at one point through an agency that specialized in placing skilled blue-collar workers. At the time of our interview each were working through one of the four general trade agencies that cooperated in my research. Interviews were conducted from 2006 to 2008. Notably they were done before the latest economic crisis, and therefore do not include any discussions on the effects of macro-economic downturns.

Interviews were supplemented with ethnographic data collected at two local businesses that use temporary employment. The research questions that form the core of the project revolve around cultural issues regarding the construction of the meanings of work, and the social interactions and discourses through which work is rendered meaningful. The in-depth examination of cultural processes lends itself to qualitative analysis and allows for a more subtle inspection of social processes at the micro and organizational level (Jacobs, 1994). Qualitative interviewing also offers researchers the flexibility to delve more deeply into particular issues when required, including issues that participants may take for granted (Kvale, 1996; Jacobs, 1994). This approach allows the interviewer contribute to the process and views the interview as a joint accomplishment between the interviewer and the interviewee (Fontana and Prokos 2007; Gubrium and Holstein 2003).

Qualitative interviewing also offers researchers the flexibility to delve more deeply into particular issues when required, including issues that participants may take for granted (Jacobs, 1994; Kvale, 1996). The use of ethnography provides rich contextual data that elaborates informal relations and the opportunity to analyze organizations as systems of meanings (Agar, 1983). It can provide insight into the ways external environments are mediated within organizations, and facilitate the examination of ethics and normative behavior (Morrill and Fine, 1997).

Participants in the study were selected using two techniques: self-selection and snowball sampling. Primary access to participants was achieved through eight cooperating temporary staffing agencies in and around a Midwest metropolitan area. Staffing agencies were selected based on the criteria that they focused exclusively on placing workers in temporary positions and their willingness to participate in the study. A vast majority of firms approached refused to participate in the study. Two agencies did not refuse participation, but referred the study to their legal departments and never responded back. Another agency agreed to participate in the study and informed workers about it, but encouraged workers not to respond. Agencies ranged from those that offer extended temporary placement to those that specialized in day-today placement. As a result, participants in the study experienced a wide range of organizational realities in the temporary work that they had performed.

Workers' contact information is protected as confidential by agency policy and federal privacy law. While such legislation is important in protecting the privacy rights of workers, it did create challenges in contacting temp workers for this study. Since I could not make direct contact with employees, I developed a self-selection strategy with the cooperation of agencies in

which letters of introduction were distributed with employees' weekly paychecks. Letters

contained a brief description of the study and contact information. Interested workers were then

able to contact the researcher, ask additional questions, and schedule times to be interviewed.

The initial waves of letters provided no incentives and resulted in ten interviews. The following

waves of letters offered a $15 incentive payment funded by a small research grant. An additional

35 interviews were conducted once incentive payments were included. Of the forty-five

participants, fourteen were contacted through referrals from other participants. Eleven temp

workers scheduled interviews, but failed to appear at the agreed upon times.

The limited sample size and non-random sample techniques limit generalizability.

However, respondents do represent a wide range of voices about the experience of temp work.

The final purposive sample included 24 European Americans, 18 African Americans, and 3

Native Americans. One of the participants who identified as primarily as white also identified

himself as Native American. Five African Americans also identified as white, Native American,

or both. None of the participants were Latino, a distinct divergence from the demographics of

temporary workers as a whole. Twenty-nine participants were men, sixteen were women. The

mean age was 30 with ages ranging from 19 to 68. Twenty-one are currently single, six are

divorced, six are married, and twelve are cohabitating. Twenty participants have no children.

Twenty-five do have children, of which fifteen currently have at least one of their children living

in their household. Seven participants dropped out of highschool, though three have gone on to

get their GED. Five have a highschool degree. Eighteen have some college education but have

not received a degree. Two have an associate's degree, nine have a bachelor's degree, and four

have a graduate degree. The demographics of minority participants differed substantially from

the demographics of white participants. Minority participants were more likely to be women, were more likely to have children, achieved lower levels of educational attainment, and had an older average age than white participants. Such variation is important in understanding the substantially different views of temp work reported by African-American and Native-American interviewees compared to European-American interviewees. The names used to identify them are pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality.

My interviews with temp workers focused on a wide range of topics. Each interview began with the collection of demographic information, followed by a general question of why they were doing temp work. Because I wanted to be able to relate the experiences of participants to the existing research on temporary work arrangements, I asked them each specific questions regarding the experiences at work. Included among these questions were prompts for interviewees to discuss the interactions they had with various people within the social milieu of work: agency representatives, managers, permanent workers, and other temp workers. We discussed participants work histories, including other temp and contingent jobs as well as any non-temp jobs they had held. Other topics we discussed examined the meanings of work, perceptions of identity, and how temp work related to other aspects of participants' lives. Midway through the data collection period, I began to specifically conclude our discussion of work place interactions asking interviewees if they felt like they were an outsider at their temp jobs. This particular question was added after many participants had used the specific term "outsider" to describe how they felt. So in interviews were participants did not raise the issue on their own, I told them what other participants had said and if they agreed or disagreed with that statement.

The segments of the interviews regarding experiences at various workplaces were relatively structured. While I let participants lead discussions wherever they wanted to take them, I would prompt them on any issues relating to workplace interactions and the organization of temp work that they did not directly address. Discussions of how their experiences outside of work influenced how they perceived temping developed more organically. Interview prompts on this topic were aimed at getting participants to go into more detail on comments they had made rather than to get their views on issues that they did not directly mention. The use of these two differing interview strategies was the fortuitous result of the first two interviews. The participants I refer to as "David" and "John" in this study immediately connected their experiences to broader notions of "redemption" in their lives. Without any type of prompt, they developed highly articulated notions of how their lives were being transformed by their experiences as temps. As a result of these two interviews, when other participants began to talk about their lives outside of work, I would ask them questions to lead them to more in-depth discussions.

Interviews with racial minority participants included significant discussions regarding racial identity and discrimination. Generally, interviewees initiated this discussion on their own, to which I responded with additional prompts. On a few occasions I did ask them about racial discrimination on the job which then acted as a springboard to a broader discussion of race and racism.

Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 3½ hours; the average was about 1 ½ hours. Interview schedules were completely covered in each interview, though one interview was abbreviated out of safety concerns. In this interview, I did not prompt in-depth discussion on

comments made by the participant and instead simply asked the next question on the schedule. I recorded and personally transcribed the interviews. Sentence fragments, stutters, and other vocal irregularities (such as "uh. . .") have been edited for clarity.

Summary of Participants

Pseudonym	Sex	Race/ Ethnicity	Age	Marital Status	Children (in home)	Income- Ind.
Alex	Male	White	18-25	Single	0 (0)	10,000-14,999
Allen	Male	White	18-25	Cohabitating	1 (1)	Less than 10,000
Alonzo (1)	Male	Black	26-35	Cohabitating	2 (1)	15,000-24,999
Andrew	Male	White	26-35	Married	0 (0)	35,000-49,999
Aria	Female	Black	18-25	Single	0 (0)	Less than 10,000
Billy	Male	Native American	36-45	Single	0 (0)	10,000-14,999
Bobby	Male	White	36-45	Single	0 (0)	10,000-14,999
Brandon	Male	White	36-45	Married	0 (0)	35,000-49,999
Bruce	Male	White	46-55	Cohabitating	2 (0)	15,000-24,999
Chris	Male	White	18-25	Single	0 (0)	Less than 10,000
Chuck	Male	Black	36-45	Cohabitating	7 (0)	10,000-14,999
Curtis	Male	White	26-35	Single	0 (0)	10,000-14,999

Dalton	Male	Native American White	26-35	Single	0 (0)	Less than 10,000
Dante	Male	Black	26-35	Single	2 (0)	Less than 10,000
David	Male	White	46-55	Single	0 (0)	10,000-14,999
Dawn (2)	Female	Black	36-45	Cohabitating	5 (5)	Less than 10,000
Deborah	Female	Black White Pacific Islander	46-55	Cohabitating	2 (0)	10,000-14,999
Ervin	Male	Black Native American	46-55	Single	4 (0)	10,000-14,999
Jacob (2)	Male	Black	26-35	Cohabitating	5 (5)	Less than 10,000
Jada	Female	Black	36-45	Single	3 (0)	Less than 10,000
Janelle	Female	White	18-25	Married	1 (1)	10,000-14,999
Janis	Female	White	36-45	Single	0 (0)	10,000-14,999
Joane	Female	White	46-55	Remarried	1 (0)	25,000-34,999
John	Male	Black Native American	56-65	Divorced	3 (0)	35,000-49,999
Jude	Male	White	26-35	Reconciled	3 (1)	Less than 10,000
Justin	Male	White	18-25	Single	0 (0)	10,000-14,999
Keith	Male	White	26-35	Cohabitating	0 (0)	15,000-24,999

Kevin	Male	Black	18-25	Single	0 (0)	15,000-24,999
Melissa	Female	White	26-35	Cohabitating	2 (2)	Less than 10,000
Mitchell	Male	Black	46-55	Cohabitating	0 (0)	25,000-34,999
Pamela (3)	Female	White	46-55	Divorced	2 (2)	35,000-49,999
Patricia	Female	White	46-55	Divorced	1 (0)	35,000-49,999
Richard	Male	White	56-65	Married	2 (0)	15,000-24,999
Rosaline	Female	Black	36-45	Cohabitating	5 (4)	Less than 10,000
Russell	Male	Native American	36-45	Cohabitating	5 (4)	35,000-49,999
Sam (3)	Male	White	18-25	Single	0 (0)	10,000-14,999
Sarah	Female	White	18-25	Single	0 (0)	Less than 10,000
Shandra	Female	Black	26-35	Seperated	1 (1)	less than 10,000
Shirley	Female	Black	36-45	Divorced	2 (1)	25,000-34,999
Stacy	Female	White	26-35	Single	0 (0)	Less than 10,000
Steve	Male	White	26-35	Single	0 (0)	15,000-24,999
Tamika	Female	Black	26-35	Single	3 (3)	25,000-34,999
Theresa	Female	Black White	18-25	Single	2 (2)	Less than 10,000

Tyra (1)	Female	Black Pacific Islander	36-45	Cohabitating	3 (1)	10,000-14,999
Walter (4)	Male	White	66+	Married	5 (1)	50,000-74,999

1. **Alonzo and Tyra are cohabitating together**
2. **Jacob and Theresa are cohabitating together**
3. **Sam is Pamela's son and currently living with her**
4. **Walter is the legal guardian and raising his 8 year old granddaughter**

Outline of the Dissertation

In the next chapter, I discuss the on-the-job experiences of participants as context for the life course narratives that they construct to make sense of their experiences with temp work. In particular, I describe the ways that the unique aspects of the organization of temporary employment shape their perceptions of their work. I also exam examine the effects that the division of labor and social isolation have on these perceptions. By understanding these experiences as the common point at which narratives are retroactively constructed, we can gain greater insight into the importance these narratives play in participants finding meaning in what they do.

In chapter 3, I begin to discuss the actual narratives provided by participants that connect their work experiences to other aspects of their lives. I begin by looking at those participants who perceive temp work as a way of transitioning from one stage of the life course to another. In particular, I discuss those who see temp work as part of their efforts to get a college degree or land a career job. I also address the unique narratives provided by those participants who have moved into retirement. In this chapter I also discuss those participants who either perceive temp work as a way of recovering from some personal crisis or as crisis itself that has caused significant damage in their lives.

The unique experiences of Native-American and African-American temp workers are addressed in Chapter 4. I examine the ways in which these participants perceive temp work as a way out of their financial hardships, as a means of becoming productive members of society, good parents, and escaping the stigmas and limitations associated with dropping out of high school and incarceration. I will further discuss the contradictions contained within these narratives and they way that the reliance on temp work may actually perpetuate their economic marginality. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of a subset of participants that have constructed life course narratives which run counter to those of the minority particpants discussed. Namely these temps perceive temp work not as a gateway into the formal economy, but rather as an escape hatch from it.

Finally, in chapter 5, I conclude my discussion of the empirical data and discuss the implications of my research on current theoretical perspectives on the meaning of work. I also discuss future possibilities in research as well as possible theoretical development.

Chapter 2

Contextualizing Life Course Narratives:
Temporary Workers, Perpetual Outsiders

Beliefs that nation is not a reprieve,
It tends to smell, even seems to swell,
Emitting the differences in categories of the weak,
Some of us spewing and refusing to accept,
This blatant and ill assessed daily regime,
Be ever mindful though,
We were all born to be kings and queens.

Anonymous Poet

Regardless of where participants began or ended the stories that they created to make sense of their experiences as temp workers, they all shared a common point of intersection. At some moment in their lives, they walked into a temporary employment agency looking for a job. The work experiences that they had as a result of that one common experience, therefore, acted as a focal point for where they have been and where the they are going. Their perceptions of, and reactions to, what they experience at work inform and provide context for the life course narratives that they used to make sense of their realities.

At its best, work can be a rewarding, fulfilling, and empowering experience. It can make us better people and through it reach our full potential as an individual. As the above poet wrote, "we were all born to be kings and queens." Yet somewhere along the way many of the jobs in our society, including the jobs discussed in this study, have failed in that promise.[13] Similar to what the critics of temporary labor arrangements argue, the workers in this study

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[13]Theorists critical of the social impacts of capitalism [for example, Marx (1964), Braverman (1974), Edwards (1990), and Sennett (1998)] have noted the alienating effects of capitalist labor arrangements and the dehumanizing impacts they have on self-actualization.

almost universally felt that the jobs they held through temp agencies offered very little in terms of intrinsic rewards.[14] Within this chapter, I examine how the organizational and structural realities of temp work were perceived by participants. In particular, I look at how the routinized work, insecurity, and unstable, sporadic and fragmented employment associated with temping effected not only how participants viewed the work they were doing, but how it shaped their perceptions of the social interactions and relationships that existed in the workplace.

The descriptions offered by participants in this chapter are not as straightforward and the neo-Marxian arguments on alienation presented in the first chapter. Sometimes participants reported having jobs unpredictable in length while at other times having long-term temp jobs. Sometimes they reported being assigned the low-level jobs permanent workers did not want, while at other times they work alongside them. Sometimes they reported being ostracized by those workers and ignored by other temps, other times they did not. Temp work is unpredictable, even in its unpredictability. However, every worker reported experiencing some constellation of the alienating experiences detailed in the following pages in nearly every job they discussed. The end result was a common theme regularly brought up in our interviews together: They generally felt like "outsiders" at the places they were contracted to. It is this psychological distance

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[14]Critics argue that temporary labor arrangements are organized around daily regimes that structure work in ways that are often alienating and offer little to workers in terms of self-actualization (Bjorkquist and Kleinhesselink, 1999; Boyce, et. al., 2007; Rogers, 1995). From such critical perspectives, temporary employment intensifies the extent to which workers become separated from the production process, the goods and services produced through their labor, the social relations of production and ultimately from themselves and their human potential. It has characteristics that often minimize the integration of temps into the workplace, including the brevity and instability of employment (LaRue and Vezina, 2007; Nollen, 1996). Furthermore, many workers find themselves segregated within the production process as they are assigned to perform "low" tasks (Henson, 1996; Vosko, 2006).

between self and work that provides the context for understanding the importance of life course narratives in participants' attempts to make sense of their lives as temps.

Reactions to the Structural and Organizational Dynamics Of Temp Work

The participants in this study ultimately understood little of the specific policies and laws described in the opening chapter that shape the temporary labor industry. And while they may not have been able to articulate the structural and organizational dynamics of temporary employment, these realities significantly impacted the ways in which they perceived their work. From unstable and erratic employment, to doing the "dirty work," to the triangular employment arrangement between worker, agency and firm, participants identified a number of factors that left them feeling frustrated or disconnected.

One of the factors that most impacted participants initial experiences with temp work was the new dynamic that existed between them and the firm they were working at. Because of the triangular employment relationship in which they were the employee of the agency that placed them and not the firm where they were working, there were a number issues brought up interviews. One basic issue was that of communication. "Keith" offered one example of poor communication that he viewed as particularly embarrassing,

> "I tell you, the most irritating thing is when they call the temp agency [to fire you] and they don't tell you. And you leave work one day thinking you're coming in to work the next day and then you get home and there's a message on your machine from the temp agency. And like a coward, they called the temp agency and told the temp agency that you're not cutting it and they won't need you back. And won't tell you to your face. I did have that happen to me. I was supposed to log all of the product that comes in. Like, count it, stock it, record it, and put it away. Which is actually a real job. It's not like you're a line worker. They hired me and I worked there for a week, and I thought I did a pretty good job. I actually, this was embarrassing, so I came to work Monday and he had called Friday. And the temp agency had failed to notify me. So I show up Monday morning and go in

and there was no time card, in front of the whole factory. So I go over to the office that I was supposed to be working in and the head manager guy was surprised to see me and said, 'oh, I'm sorry, I called them on Friday, we had to let you go.' But he had actually complained about me. He said I was the last one back from the break room after breaks. It was just horse shit. He just didn't like me. And he, like a coward, called the temp agency. I had left for work that day, and I remember he said, 'hey Keith, have a good weekend.' And like, why wouldn't he just say, 'we had to let you go.'"

In this story there were two key lapses in communication,. The agency failed to inform Keith that he no longer was placed at the factory. Second, the person who had supervised over him for a full week, from Keith's perspective, did not feel the need to tell him that he was performing below standards, tell him how to improve, or even tell him that he was fired. Of course, Keith's assumption was also that he was fired solely because he was disliked. Because he was not actually an employee of the factory, he felt he was easily expandable and could be let go on a whim.

Participants' frustrations with their employment status was that within this triangular relationship, they viewed agencies as consistently favoring the contracting firms of them. Several workers felt as though the agencies were neglecting their responsibilities to workers in order to protect their contracts with clients. Though she would not go into any specific instance, "Tyra" voiced her frustration to me on this issue,

> Temporary agencies, to me, they cheat you. They don't pay you what you're worth. It's just like you're a head. You're not treated right. Sometimes with employers, you can be disrespected at jobs, and they won't do anything. It's all about the contract that they have with them and not you. They claim when you come in that they're going to take care of you, and you're not to be disrespected and harassed. And it's not true.

One of the consequences of this perceived favoring of clients over workers was that it lead

workers to feel as though they were devalued and unimportant. When I asked "Bobby" how

important he felt he was to the agencies he worked through, he admitted,

> I think the relationship with their clients are more important than their workers.
> Because they can always find somebody who's hard up for money to do some
> work. I think they seem to be pretty good at following the laws as far as liability
> and injury and things like that. But as far as understanding family emergencies or
> your car breaking down. Yeah, they'll just go to the next person.

Such instances only add to the isolation and alienation experienced by participants further

rendering the temp work they did less meaningful.

"Mitchell" added to this notion by arguing favoritism was primarily due to agencies'

overemphasis on profits at the expense of developing meaningful relationships with their

workers:

> You're given more opportunities on the east coast to do things. They usually wait
> for you to screw up. It seems out here they're a little more stereotypical. I noticed
> that they don't, let's just go for myself. . . In the beginning they're not as, you're a
> way for them to make money here, which is the way with everybody. But you
> have less of a relationship.

In this way, many of the workers I talked to often felt like second-class citizens. Profits were

primary, and as a result clients were prioritized and deferred to, sometimes at the expense of

workers' well being.

The argument that agencies favored clients must be qualified, however. Many of the

participants likely had an accurate understanding of the relative importance of clients and

workers to agencies. But, as the following story told to me by "Chris" demonstrates, the belief in

favoritism among participants could sometimes cause them to overlook other factors and excuse

their own poor behavior.

> I was given an assignment at a local elementary school for a long-term assignment for a month as a janitor. I was sent in at four o'clock the first day. I was trained in by this guy [Tom] and like he showed me everything I was supposed to do. He was the only one I ever worked with. He's the only one I ever saw. And then I find out that he's not even a manager, and that I had this guy just come in and start barking orders at me. And I asked him what his fucking problem was and he told me that he was my boss. And I said, the hell you are, cause I've never met this man before.

It was at this point that the agency Chris was working through got involved,

> And that got solved because I had to go in to the staffing office I was working for, and I had to go in with my boss and him and he had to lay it out that he was my boss. I was like, you can't just come in and start barking orders without introducing yourself. I don't really consider this guy my boss and I never see him either. He's supposed to work the same shift as I am, and I've only seen him one hour in the last three weeks I worked there. He came in once and clocked in and left and then he comes back and clocks out. Then I started getting an increased workload with less time and the same pay. I find out I'm doing my boss's work that he's supposed to be doing. And I went to [the agency] about it. They called the district, and pretty much what it came down to was the guy replaced me the next day because of unsatisfactory work, when really it just comes down to they probably came to an agreement that we'll give you someone else and you can give them whatever. Because they don't really care about the workers, cause you know they companies that go through them for employees and they make lots of money doing that, and then they have employees that come in looking for companies that if they lose one or two employees, they don't care as long as they don't loose the company's business.

Chris may very well have been doing the work that was actually the responsibility of someone else. If he was telling me the truth, he was certainly treated unfairly, since he was never paid his last paycheck and was not allowed to go back to the workplace and pick up his personal belongings, including his coat. He may have also been correct that the agency favored the client in order to keep their business. However, blaming favoritism also sidesteps the issue that even by his own account his behavior was at best confrontational and insubordinate.

The brevity of employment that many of the participants experienced was also a source of frustration. For many of the participants working in the larger metro area, the temporary jobs were often day-to-day, and therefore only provided one day of guaranteed work. An incident reported to me by "Jacob" highlighted the absurdity that he viewed such arrangements to have, and was representative of the disdain workers typically had for these jobs:

> Just ran into it [a short job] today. Well, I had an assignment and they completely gave me the wrong directions. I was supposed to be there around 10:30. Well, because of the bad directions, I didn't get there until probably a quarter til twelve. And when I got there, they told me they were through. And not only that, a guy from the same temp company, his ride left him, so. . .

Other participants worked a variety of jobs that limited the amount of time that had at specific assignments, and therefore other workers. "Dawn" worked sporadically with an agency specializing in nursing, taking on shifts for regular RN's that were taking sick leave or personal time. Several of the participants worked at local sporting events as parking lot attendants and worked only a limited number of days every year. Two participants, "Jada" and "Rosaline," worked through an agency specializing in catering events. The longest assignment reported by either was two days long. Other short-term assignments included construction, renovation, moving, clerical, assembly, and electrical work. Short-term assignments such as these were so brief that participants felt little opportunity to connect in anything more than a superficial way with both the job itself and the coworkers they met. For example, when I was talking to "Dante" about the relationships he had with others, he told me, "As far as the day-to-day stuff, you're pretty much going somewhere different everyday, so it's really not an issue."

Even during longer placements, several participants noted frustration with the brevity of temp jobs. Dawn had also had experiences with jobs that she perceived as being temp-to-hire:

> I've gone all the way up to the three month point, and then they would hire within. That made me mad, cause you know, I would try to get there early, be on time, follow the rules, and get all the way up to the ninety day limit and then. . . Yes, it's frustrating. Especially when you think that you even got friendly with the people that you were working with and everybody saying that they like you and you're doing a good job. And then when it comes down to it, they hire somebody else. I thought the point was to do a good job and they'd want you to keep coming.

When I asked her if being let go hurt how she feels about herself, she responded, "feelings hurt for a while, but I usually just go onto the next job." In this way, job insecurity has resulted in Dawn taking a more "nomadic" approach to work and investing less in particular jobs.

Another participant who experienced the bureaucratic "max time" some employers placed on the use of temps was David. His most recent temp job was at a factory where he worked as a packer.

> They let you go after 1,000 hours. I suspect it's a law. It's by code anyway. After 1,000 hours, said employer has to terminate you because if you work over 1,000 hours then I believe it's by law. "We're not going to let you exploit these people." To keep you from exploiting people, you have to give them the benefits you give the full time employee. So the turnover rate is high in that situation. And honestly, I don't know how accurate and whose responsibility it is to know when the 999th hour is coming up. . . I probably could have worked a little more than my thousand hours, and all of a sudden somebody, be it [the agency] or [the factory], did some number crunching and say, 'hey we have to let a whole bunch of these people go. And then you can be rehired ninety more days.

Not only does this statement by David show the insecurity of temporary employment, but it also highlights the ambiguity of its organization from the perspective of the worker. He had a general understanding of the policy, but did not have a full understanding of the purpose of the policy, or even who's policy it was. David was still unemployed at the time of our interview.

While many of the workers I interviewed experienced temp work in highly stunted and fragmented ways, several have had a fundamentally different experience in terms of the

organization of temporary employment. For these few workers, the way employment was structured was not a source of frustration. "Aria," for example, worked in the office of one of the temp agencies for a full year.

> I don't think I was even supposed to be extended on at [the agency] as long as I was. I think I was only supposed to be there initially for a couple of weeks while they found another person. Now I've been there in the office for a solid year. I just like working [there]. Like, I just do.

Her relationship with the firm was so stable that she told me that the agency had actually made arrangements for her to have work waiting for her after she moved out of state to attend graduate school. Other participants, specifically retirees who were working sporadically as parking lot attendants, did not specifically mention anything negative about their unstable work situations, mainly because it fit into their notion of what they wanted their retirement to be. Their perspectives will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Another factor that had an alienating effect on the workers I talked to was the division of labor between permanent workers and themselves in which they were routinely assigned the "dirty" or tedious tasks that the permanent workers did not want to do. "Curtis" provided a specific example that he experienced while working at a data entry firm. "They were scanning some sort of tax documents into a computer," he told me, "so you had to place a page before each page that had to be scanned. So it was just terribly repetitive. Full/time people had something a little less annoying and repetitive to do." Aria, who spoke so fondly of the agency for which she worked, got visibly irritated when I asked her if their was a division of labor between temps and permanent workers:

> More often than not. I went to this place, and I asked them what they wanted me to do. And they had a stack of filing taller than me. I was like, 'that's not fair.

Why do you got to leave a little temp to do all this filing?' I was kind of mad at them just because it was a whole bunch. And their filing system in there is kind of funky. It's just a weird filing system. It was not good for me. I hated it. You know they don't like to do filing because it's stacked up to the ceiling. And the other lady was doing her little thing, she was doing all the good things like answering the phone. Yeah, she got all the good stuff. I had crap. For lack of better words. Sorry. I had crap.

Aria was not alone in her perception of the work temps were assigned. During my interview with Chris, he shared a similar opinion of the work temps were assigned to do:

You always get the crap jobs. If it's construction, you're usually doing clean-up. If it's maintenance. . . Maintenance is especially a crap job, because it's already a crap job. But there are people that are full time, and they've been there the whole time. So like, they'll hide all the good vacuums that work and keep them for themselves, so you get stuck with the shitty equipment. And they make sure you get the shittiest jobs, like go clean the bathrooms. Oh yeah, full time workers always do that.

Several other participants echoed this kind of language, one referring to the tasks he was assigned to as "the bitch jobs" and another calling it "grunt work." One participant, Mitchell, compared temping to working on "slave ships" doing unskilled and unchallenging work. "Ervin," who worked at an auto shop summed the issue up succinctly when he told me, "we're just there temporary, so that just comes with the territory until you work your way into a permanent."

In particular, participants often reported having to do the most routinized work and generally believed such work was directly related to their temporary status. "Janelle," who worked for a time sewing cargo nets, was describing the division of labor between temporary and permanent workers when she noted,

The only actual temporary people out there were sewers. Because they make straps, ratchet straps. So they have people sitting out there sitting at a sewing machine, sticking this strap on this machine and pushing a peddle all day. And those are the only temporary people and I understand why. It's because it's so repetitive. And they only places I've been put, it's all repetitive. It's all the same

thing over and over and over again. They can't find people that are going to stay there and do that for twenty years.

Janelle was far from the only participant to mention monotonous work. Curtis and "Janis," for example, discussed the monotony of preparing and scanning page after page of documents to create digital files. Several described the tediousness of line work.

Another participant, "Steve," described a routine practice that he and his fellow temp workers did as a result of the segregation they experienced at a shoe factory. They sabotaged the production process.

> I keep thinking of the shoe factory. Because it was a four week job, there were no permanent workers, or no permanent workers with us. There wasn't even a real boss that was around to make sure that we were doing what we were supposed to be doing. So it was actually. . . We were inclined to throw a wrench in the system, you know what I mean? 'Cause there was no supervision, we would mismatch shoes. Put the wrong sizes in the wrong boxes. And you know, we would still get our check. We'd know they would never figure it out.

I asked him what made him want to do something like that, to which he replied, "it was more of an isolation. Well, I know I'm doing a crap job, but it wasn't the crap job. It was the lack of supervision from someone who was stable, I think." So while the organization of the labor process resulted in temp workers doing tedious low-level work, it was the isolation and the feeling that no one felt he mattered that lead to Steve's resistance.

One other factor that had a negative impact on participants, either as a source of aggravation or isolation, revolved around issues regarding the organizational cultures of the firms at which they were placed. Participants did describe many instances where client firms did try to do things to bring them into the fold, to varying degrees of success. Other times, they reported companies doing cultural activities for their permanent workers, but excluding all of the temp

workers. Participants also told of many firms that did not do anything to try making them feel

included, simply wanting them to get their work done. The end result of these failed,

exclusionary, or lacking strategies for building organizational culture, participants often felt

distant and isolated while on the job.

In talking about the abstract notion of organizational culture, participants and I focused

our conversation on those things that the companies did that they felt were aimed at making them

feel like they belonged and included. Most of the time, interviewees mentioned social activities

that employers would hold for all workers, permanent and temporary alike. "They had a lot of

little things, like little events they had like marching bands," Dante told me. "They include

everybody. It wasn't like the temp workers were excluded." Others mentioned similar activities,

ranging from company picnics, ice cream socials, barbeques, and celebrity speakers.

For some of the workers I talked to, these activities did seem to have the desired effect as

they felt particular connected to those companies that they felt showed they truly cared about

them. Dawn, for example, felt that the activities offered by one particular company helped

decrease the stigma of being a temp:

> They treated me like family. Like, they included me in the picnic. They had a
> picnic. And when they had any kind of dinner, they included me in all of that.
> It's been a really long time since I had been at one that treated me like, "she just a
> temp, she don't know anything."

"Tamika" echoed these positive sentiments,

> [One place] was really good about this. They would reward you with different
> trinkets. Or always have cake and ice cream or pizza day or potluck for us. Or
> order food out. They would BBQ for us. I mean, on your break, they would hire a
> company during the summertime and you could get as many hotdogs and chips
> and pops as you want. They would always have different activities for us, I loved
> it. I loved it. Makes you feel like you're appreciated.

For every participant who felt a sense of inclusion as a result of these efforts by client firms, there were others that experienced similar activities but were more cynical of them. In order to explain to me his views of these company activities, "Andrew" told me about a party one company had held for workers after they had been bought by another firm:

> In terms of this temp job, yes. But I think it's ineffectual. They had a [firm's new name] celebration party where we would try to imagine the impression we had to other people. Basically saying, 'don't embarrass us.' It's annoying to me how they come up with this stuff. The people that I imagine would come up with that.

Not only did he view such activities as ineffectual, but the tone of his voice and the last part of his statement made it clear that he felt they were disingenuous and ultimately insulting.

While some like Andrew viewed these quasi-recreational activities with disdain, those cultural strategies more overtly directed at work and productivity tended to receive the most scorn from participants. As "Stacy" explained to me,

> We did some group things [during training]. Like we drew pictures that demonstrated who we were and that sort of thing. And then each person went up and guessed who was whom and that sort of thing. And then we had a scavenger hunt to figure out who each manager was and that sort of thing. I guess that was kind of a team building exercise. At first I thought they were stupid, but it turned out to be kind of fun. And it did kind of draw us together because we all helped each other.

In this particular example, Stacy ultimately did come to regard the training activity positively despite her initial skepticism. The same could not be said for "Kevin"

> [The factory] had their little 'team.' So they broke up the big floor that we worked on , they broke that up into divisions, and each division was a team. And then you had a manager that was your team leader. And teams were competing against who got the best number. And you're supposed to have a great bonding experience cause you sit with your team and all this other stuff. But you don't choose who your team is. So I don't know how you're supposed to have this great bonding experience if you don't get to choose. But we're supposed to have this great bonding experience, plus it's supposed to make you work more efficiently

and bring in higher numbers and everything else. Which is a bunch of BS. So that was that.

"Jude" shared a similar view regarding the emphasis placed on being part of a "team." The hyperbole of his statements highlight the amount of disdain he had for what he considered to be just another confidence scheme:

> For the most part, it's just like communism. Sounds great in theory, but when you actually put it into practice, it's a sham. They don't really give a shit what we think. Out [there] I got a lot of that where, you know, group meeting. We want to get your input. We want to know what's going on. And then the impression I got from it was that they didn't really care. They were just doing it like a bone to throw to see if we'd at least be happy that we got heard, even though they didn't listen to us.

For these participants, culture-building activities seemed trivial at best, manipulative at worst. Either they were viewed as a waste of time or as just another means of social control within the workplace [much like the critical analysis of work cultures (see Edwards, 1979; Richard, et. al., 2009; Rogers, 2000; Rosen and Baroudi, 1992)].

The issue of organizational culture within workplaces that had both permanent and temporary employees was sometimes even more problematic. The experience of some participants was that cultural strategies were inclusive of both temporaries and permanent workers, such as with Keith, who told me, "I would say most of the time, you're just like a full/time employee." For others, however, organizational culture became just another thing that left the temps feeling isolated and marginalized. David, for instance, still had an overall positive view of the factory that he was placed at, but showed frustration in the rigid demarcation between temporary and permanent that he felt existed within the firm's culture:

> Officially, [they're] very good to their employees. And the pay is good. The pay is decent. They offer a lot of visiting lectures. Like, Buck O'Neil, the well known

Kansas City [baseball player], came in there. They have a lot of little events, but they make it clear as corporate policy, maybe under legal grounds and budgetary considerations, they make it known that when we have a Buck O'Neil come to visit, when we have an ice cream social, temp people are not allowed to go. And most temp people I believe abide by that. There were times where there was an event scheduled for the [permanent] employees where the [temp] people were reminded by [the agency] itself that you cannot participate in this. I thought it was ridiculous. I thought it was unnecessary. It did make me feel less welcome. It made me feel like less of a. . . it could effect your attitude in the sense that I'm happy to be here, I feel welcomed here, and I'm going to respond in time. I didn't understand the purpose of it. . . I don't want to say snobbish, but you felt that's how it presented itself.

Another participant, "Deborah," was in a similar situation where she believed she was going to

have a chance to meet another famous athlete, this time Tiger Woods, only to have the firm dash

her hopes,

I worked for [a children's hospital]. A burn unit. And the children had had physical deformities and they did corrective surgery and things like that. And all the ladies that were permanent employees got to go to the golf tournament that Tiger Woods has just started. Well, they put this on every year as a fund-raiser. Well, Tiger Woods came to play and this was his first big deal. And of course I wanted to meet Tiger Woods. 'No way Jose, you're going to be the one sitting back at the camp watching everything.' And this is after I packed all the gift bags for all the celebrities and everyone coming in.

The issue that participants had was not so much that they missed out on meeting a celebrity or an

athlete, or missed out on whatever it was that the firm had offered. As Jacob remarked, "I mean,

that was something to deal with, knowing that you worked just as hard as everybody else did. It

probably wasn't even a money thing. Just a few seconds of knowing that you were part of a team

that accomplished a goal together. It wasn't a separate deal." The issue, then, was that being

excluded from the activities was perceived by these temps as another reminder that they were not

"real" employees and not part of the "team."

According to participants, many client firms did not attempt to develop an organizational culture that was inclusive of temporaries.   When I asked Janelle, who was currently in between jobs when we talked, if her last job tried to make her feel as though she belonged, she replied, "I would say [the factory] didn't. [They] strictly brought me in to do a job and catch up. So they weren't interested in anything else but me sitting there and doing a job." Janis hypothesized that this pragmatic approach by firms was due to the nature of temp work itself,

> The other jobs, even if they lasted two or three weeks, I think I was seen as a short-term person. Like, 'she's only going to be here a couple weeks.' So it was likely, or less necessary even, to try to bring me into the culture.

Whether or not the exclusion of temp workers was intentional, the message that they received was clear: they were not like other workers, they did not really belong.

Perceptions of the Social Relations of Temp Work

In the previous section, I described the various ways in which the attitudes of participants about their work and the places where they were contracted were shaped by the structural and organizational dynamics of temporary employment. But it was not just these organizational features that directly impacted how they viewed there work. The social interactions which they engaged in while at work also influenced how they felt about the jobs they had. Just like the varying organizational realities they reported experiencing at different client firms, the quality of interactions and relationships they developed varied widely from firm to firm. While sometimes they felt like they were welcomed by permanent workers and other temps, ther times they felt excluded and ignored. Sometimes they even reported choosing to isolate themselves from the workers around them, showing just how alienating temp life could be.

Sometimes the social isolation that participants felt was the direct result of how the work was organized. Several of the jobs held by various interviewees were designed in a way that left them physically isolated with little opportunity for social interaction. The most common experiences of this type were among workers placed at call centers. Initially I had asked Andrew, who worked at a call center, if their was a division of labor between temporary and permanent workers, to which he replied,

> As far as where we're physically seated in the structure, which is a really bland sort of rectangle almost like a strip mall, we're just sort of filling in the gaps. In terms of job duties, I would guess we're the front lines. We're doing the regular stuff: [list deleted to maintain confidentiality]. But I haven't noticed a separation of our full/time staff and temp workers. And also, there's actually little time for interaction between people. Essentially, I kind of visualized it when I came in as like a Tyson chicken plant where you're just put in a little cubicle, a little spot, and instead of packing food in this one space all day, you're fielding phone calls.

For other interviewees, their isolation was even more defined. As previously mentioned, several participants worked as parking lot attendants for local sporting events.

After initially meeting with their supervisor at the beginning of their shifts, these participants would spend the rest of the workday either alone or with one other colleague at their assigned parking lot. In describing what a typical work day was like, one of the parking lot attendants, "Walter," explained, "We check in with [the agency]. We check out with them. Then we wait for parking to assign a spot for us to work. There may be three people working in an area. There may be two. There may be only one." "Patricia" also added, "there's some solitude places where you're off by yourself and there's some people who really enjoy that. They bring their books, or they sit and drink coffee in their cars and smoke cigarrettes, and are perfectly happy being all by themselves." A wide range of solitary jobs were reported by other

participants, ranging from hospitality work at racing events, janitorial work, housekeeping, construction, landscaping, and renovation.

But organizational issues of this sort are not the primary focus in this section. Rather, the primary interest is how participants perceived the social milieu of the work place and how they themselves reacted to these interactional dynamics. A key part of this revolves how participants viewed the interactions they had with permanent employees. The degree to which participants felt accepted by permanent employees varied significantly from worker to worker and from job to job. Aria best summarized the different experiences after I asked if she was openly accepted by the permanent workers she was placed with,

> At some jobs, yes. And then some jobs, no. Like one job in particular, they were very nice. Very accommodating. I don't think it was even extended. I think it was just a one day assignment. Here's the break room if you want any coffee. Kind of welcoming. Everybody who came by where I was working, "oh, how are you doing? What is your name?" Introduce themselves. Very nice. Some jobs I've literally been set in a hole and just like, "here, do this."

The differences in experiences between participants was most visibly demonstrated in the nearly polar opposite views held by Keith and Deborah when I asked them if permanent workers were accepting of temps:

> Keith: I would say one or two places out of the thirty or forty that I've worked were like that. But I would say 98% of the time you were accepted in as a coworker. You're working alongside the same people. You eat in the same cafeteria. You know, you're not going to get the same benefits and the same bonuses because your bonuses come from the temp agency. But yeah, you're just like a normal employee. You're side by side.

> Deborah: I would say 90% of the time [that permanent employees are leery of temps]. And I find that it happens, it's more prevalent possibly due to the fact that the permanent employee doesn't understand the non-compete clauses in the agreements that you can't work at a certain level. And then turning it around and from the temporary employees perspective, I find that it's difficult sometimes to

control what animosity I may feel as a temporary employee when I find out that I'm doing a job sitting next to someone and I'm getting half the pay they're getting for the job.

Depending on the workplace, participants sometimes did feel like they were perceived as one of the group. Other times, they felt that the particular characteristics of temp work did cause them to be viewed differently and created a rift between them and the permanent employees.

In situations where there was a perceived division between temps and other workers, participants would often experience it as an amorphous sense of difference. When Jacob was trying to explain how permanent workers treated him differently, he struggled to find the right words. "Well, actually it's pretty hard to put into words," he said, "I don't know, you just feel like they're not as courteous to you as they would be a fellow permanent employee." Status is often perceived as the root of this differential treatment. Jada, Jacob, and Jude articulated the belief that within the informal hierarchy of the floor, permanent workers held a privileged status over temps and that this shaped people's attitudes toward them:

> Jada: They make you feel less. They do. The comments they make. You know, they stand there and watch your behavior and run and tell the man. It's a competition. We're the lower class. They're the upper class.

> Jacob: [I feel like an outsider] pretty much every job. It's like this unspoken language when you walk in the door that I'm the permanent full/time guy and you're the temp. stay in your place and there won't be a problem. But get out of your place and there may be a problem. Does that make any sense?

> Jude: I think a lot of people who are hired on permanently to companies look down on temp workers, either because they're worried that the temp workers will be taking their jobs, or because they think you're not as important as they are.

Temps, according to this logic, should "know their place" and not interfere with permanent workers. Two factors seem to be operating in such situations. First, there is the notion that

temps are not a "normal" part of the workplace, and as such can cause disruption in the usual

ways of doing things. Second, not only are temps a disruption, but they are an actual threat to

permanent employees and must therefore be marginalized.

The idea that temps may be viewed as threats by regular employees was also expressed by

some participants. Deborah, for example, interjected while telling me how often she worked

with either permanent or temporary employees,

> And I might add that I have faced even hostility, instant hostility, animosity, a lot
> of animosity that this temp person is here. Maybe someone is there that's
> permanent and they maybe aren't doing the best that they could be doing on their
> job. So they're immediately threatened and they think they're going to br
> replaced. So you get a lot of rebuttal from that kind of thing, as well as in the
> office sector, a lot of being taken advantage of. Ok, you have to type this report,
> this report, this report. I've found that in the next two weeks' time that I'm typing
> ten extra reports that someone else who's permanent is supposed to be typing.
> They're putting them in my box just for work's sake. Things like that I've
> experienced quite a few times.

Similarly, Mitchell brought up the issue of hostility when he was talking about one of the shops

he had worked at.

> One of the guys would give me a ride, and I'd pay him for a ride. And somehow
> or another they found out that I was making more money than they were as a
> welder at the company. They wouldn't take me to work anymore. I don't know
> how they found out because that's something that I usually keep to myself. I'm
> uncomfortable discussing it.

Mitchell was violating the status hierarchy because he was making more than the other workers.

Mitchell's situation was unique among participants, however, as he was the only one who was

actually being contracted out as a skilled worker. Mitchell only accepted positions that

specifically required skilled labor, and in fact claimed he had helped establish a skilled-labor

subdivision at the agency he worked at while living on the east coast.

Even in situations where participants did not view themselves to be unskilled or undesirable workers, they often felt that permanent employees viewed them that way anyway. "Shandra" was offended by the way that she was sometimes treated by other workers,

> When you're a temp service, they act like you don't know what you're doing. They'll treat you like you're retarded, kind of sort of. But they won't come right out and say it. When you work a long time as temporary service along side people who's already working there, they treat you like you're slow a little bit.

Likewise, Chris, who had been let go from the school he was working at, told a specific story demonstrating a similar experience.

> There was a teacher that spilled liquid glitter on her floor and she was an English teacher too, which was the killer. And I don't even know why she had liquid glitter from the art room in her room. But she spilled it all over her floor and then she told me to clean it up. And I showed her the bottle. The bottle says, "do not spill on carpet or clothes, this will not come out." And I used every chemical we had. I tried to vacuum the shit. And she started yelling at me in the hallway one day. And was just, "I think you should try a little harder." I was like, "you know what, how about you do it?" And she's like, no and walked away. And one of her friends with her said, "is it possible that he tried? It's liquid glitter and it's not coming out." And she's like, "don't give me that crap. He's one of those lazy temps. He just didn't try hard enough." And I was like, fuck her.

Such stories show the ways in which commonly held stereotypes about temp workers shape interactions in the workplace. Temp workers are routinely assumed to be lazy, undisciplined, and unreliable. When those assumptions were communicated by others to the workers I interviewed, it not only created situations permeated with hostility, but also encouraged them to distance themselves from the work and the people around them.

Not all participants who experienced standoffishness from regular workers noticed any hostility or contempt from them. "Sam" believed regular workers were hesitant to get to know him simply because of the temporary nature of his placement,

> [They treat me] a little bit different, just in the fact that they know that we're not sticking around forever. It's just, this is the summer boom. You are going to be here and be out, just making your money in and out sort of thing.

Several of those I talked to seemed to understand and accept such treatment from regular employees. Janelle was not necessarily happy about the seemingly uncaring attitude some showed her, but she did try to explain it,

> There were a couple fo people who weren't even interested in knowing my name. They knew I wasn't going to be there long because the guy who was out on FMLA, he was going to come back.

Meeting workers who had so little interest in them was not a rare occurrence for participants, though it often took them a while to adjust to. At first, Bobby thought a coworker was being rude, but later reconsidered his interpretation of the conversation he had with him,

> One of the guys. . . We were going on break and introducing everybody. Saying hi. And one of the guys said, "oh, I don't need to know your name. You'll be gone in a couple of weeks anyway." And I thought it was rude at first, and then I was like, well, he wasn't rude when he said it. He didn't say it rudely. But he just had that attitude: yeah, whatever. But just basic, I don't know, kindness in the workplace would be nice. I don't understand that part.

Since most assignments that temps were given were relatively short-term, interviewees assumed that their permanent co-workers simply did not want to invest the time and energy to get to know them.

One participant suggested another possibility for why regular employees did not interact much with temporaries. Patricia had worked for many years in a city office before taking early retirement. During that time, she had a significant amount of experience with temporary workers,

> I will share something else with you. Having worked for the city and having retired from that, we over the years have used a lot of temp employees. And it's

> amazing to me how, as a full/time city employee, we really didn't even recognize the temp employees. I mean, they were just there and kind of brushed aside. And it's amazing to me that we really treated people the way we did.

It was not so much that temps were not going to be there long, and therefore not worth getting to know. It was that their presence was not even recognized. In essence, temp workers were no different from the office furniture. They were present, but for all functional purposes non-entities.

It was not just the interactions with permanent workers that caused participants to feel isolated and disconnected. Most dealt with other temps as much or more than they did permanent employees. The main exceptions to this were Stacy, who generally worked as a substitute clerical worker in small offices, and Jacob, who generally filled in on manual jobs when companies were short-handed. Participants were also more likely to report positive relationships with other temp workers compared to regular employees. Yet even within these relationships, certain tensions were reported that limited the degree to which they engaged with each other and that increased the amount of isolation they experienced.

One of the reasons why participants felt closer to other temps was because of the shared experiences they have as a result of their shared status.

> "Billy": There's more comradery. I mean, cause we're both there. We're all on the same level. And we know we're all there, whatever the job is. We're all there for the same reasons: to make money, get our job done, and keep in good standing. So you know, I think it's always good to be with other temps.

> Jude: Yeah, because temps are going through the same stuff. They realize that it's just a temporary position. I do build some kind of lasting relationship with people that I'm working with, but it winds up. You do build a closer relationship with other temp workers because you're in the same boat.

Even the shared experience of being habitually unemployed can become a source of bonding.

"Basically we all there for the same reasons: cause we can't. . . We don't have no jobs," quipped

Dante, "so we got something in common with somebody, if you know what I'm saying."

Feeling a common bond with other temps lead some participants to reach out to them

over permanent workers when entering into a new job. Janelle emphasized the importance of

having someone she could talk to in an otherwise unnerving situation,

> You're always the outsider when you start. But eventually people start to talk to you. Temporary people are more open to talk, I think. They're more polite. They tend to try to make friends easier then you would at a place where people have been there for thirty or forty years. They're more friendly because they're temporary so they've been through so many times of switching that they know you've got to talk to people in order to make a friend or find somebody to get along with.

Going into the interviews, I expected to find that temp workers would develop more

familiarity with other temps as a result of being placed at a number of common client firms.

However, I ultimately found very little evidence of this actually occurring. "Pamela," "Richard,"

Walter and "Shirley" all reported that there was a large group of temps that would regularly work

sporting events together. But outside of these regularly occurring special events, some

participants did regularly worked with the same people at different firms. As "Russell" told me

after I asked him if he regularly worked with temps he met at other jobs,

> Well, you see familiar faces, but not all of us work. . . It's not just, 'ok, your group goes here.' it's, you know, sometimes you see a face. And then another time it will be a face you've seen before, but you don't actually interact with them unless you talk to them. It's just kind of like once you see them and the next time you see them, talk to them and make them kind of feel that way: that you're on a team.

In situations like that described by Russell, participants did tend to gravitate toward familiar faces, and it did lead them to feel less isolated. Yet the relationships they developed still tended to be superficial, and were still mainly viewed as a way to pass time.

The type of social networking that was more common amongst temp workers were actually built around the pragmatic necessity of finding more work at better firms. Many of the workers I interviewed acknowledged often talking to other temps about where more work was available and which jobs were desirable or undesirable. Sometimes they talked to others about which temporary agencies were the best to work through, other times they talked about which client firms were the best or should be avoided. In one instance, a participant, Shirley, had just started working through an agency giving away food samples at local grocery stores and was telling others about the new agency,

> I told [my friend] and now she wants me to hook her up with [the new temp agency]. Matter of fact, we told a lot of people about it. Because I just felt it was easy money. Cause in a sense, all you do is just. . . They let you sit in a chair. And you just get up and pull a tab and tell them to go park in this certain area and that's it.

Likewise Sam regularly talks to his coworkers about the experiences with particular clients he's been placed with,

> I've told some of the other temp workers about my experiences with different companies. Like, I told them this job [at the speaker manufacturer] was one of the better ones that I've had. And I've told them about some of the other jobs I've had. Which one's have not bee fun and what not. One of the guys that I work with telling me a good way to get extra hours if you don't get work is to work the [sporting events] parking. He said that's what he does if he can't get enough hours during the week is he'll do parking trying to make up for that.

Some of the workers I talked to took such advice with a grain of salt, but some viewed such informal networking as an invaluable resource. Through these informal discussions, temps were

able to learn about work conditions, wages, and benefits without relying solely on the

information provided by agencies. "Chuck" strongly emphasized the importance of networking

when he told me, "that's information you need to know. You be a fool not to take it in. I mean,

if somebody tell you where to get something to eat and you're hungry, you'd be a fool not to get

nothing to eat cause you be starving , right."

One of the participants, Steve, who had been working through temp agencies the longer

than most participants, actually viewed informal networks among temporary employees as a

means of working around system and avoiding agencies all together.

> I routinely keep in touch with multiple friends of mine to find out what temp jobs
> are available through what agencies and what is the most strategic way to get the
> best jobs that are coming into town. Everyone's always talking about what other
> things might be out there and what they're moving on to. . . You ask as many as
> you can and you try to avoid the temp agency at all costs. You try to subvert them
> and go around them in every possible way. And there is a way to do it almost
> every time. I've experienced too many times where I know they're hiring for
> those jobs, but then the feeling that they're offering me to work somewhere else
> and not offering me that is a crushing blow in a way. . . It takes a long time before
> you start piecing the pieces of the puzzle together. Maybe ten years even, I didn't
> start getting wise to it until maybe four years ago.

None of the other participants spoke of networking in this way, but it does raise an intriguing

possibility. The existence of informal networks could hint at the development of a particular

temp subculture that exists amongst long-term temp workers, may not be readily apparent to

inexperienced workers, and acts as a source of resistance in the face of an industry that is

structured in a way that isolates and disempowers them.

Other participants provided a more cynical view of networking among temps, or at least

were more critical of how useful networking actually was. Some, like "Bruce," questioned its

usefulness because they simply do not relate to other temps,

> You know, you hear different stuff through the grapevine, but I don't know. Like I said, these people aren't. . . I have nothing against them, but they're not close friends of mine. I don't really discuss much with these people.

Others, such as Mitchell, go even further to question the moral qualities or work ethic of other temps, and so do not bother to try networking with them,

> Well, a lot. It depends on what type of temp you doing. I've noticed that the guys who just come in for temp labor or something like that (hate to be a stereotype person) but most of them not looking for work. They looking to support whatever they're doing. I'd just rather. . . If you come to this place everyday, maybe you should be looking for something a little more permanent. I've actually told guys where work was. Disappointing.

In these situations, participants were highlighting the inter-relational dynamics between temp workers that stifled the amount of interaction between them. They simply did not identify with each other, and this perceived lack of commonality made it difficult for them to relate to each other.

On the other hand, several participants pointed to the nature of temp work itself as the reason why networking may become ineffectual or not occur. David noticed only limited and explained it by syaing,

> People were looking out for themselves. Cause there might be a temp job with two openings. So I got the impression people weren't releasing too much information about their future plans because they didn't want to invite competition for it.

When I asked Ervin if he ever used informal networks to find temp jobs or if he relied on the agencies, he made a similar observation,

> Basically the company, unless somebody personally tells you. Which generally they really don't do unless they don't like the job or something. Because if they tell you, you might go get the job, you know, and they might not get it.

Because temps were competing with each other for jobs, they had a vested interest in not sharing information. From what these participants described, there existed a politic of temp work in which information was power and power was used to maximize personal benefit.

The politics of temp work also came through in a few other comments made during our interviews. When Chuck was telling me about the difference between how permanent workers treated him compared to how other temp workers did, he was far more critical of temps,

> You know, [permanent workers] don't look at if you a temp. They just say, "are they going to be cool?" Now I see temps treat temps like crap. Because like one temp been there longer, and so here comes this other temp, so he figured he had the authority to talk to him like that. And with the people that hired us let it go on.

For Chuck, temps seemed more interested in status than regular employees did, possible because of the more tenuous position they had within the firm. Should the firm lay off any temps, who will stay? This concern was also prominent in a statement made to me by Jacob, also while talking about his relationship with other temps,

> Then there are sometimes those that feel like well if they can catch you doing something wrong, they can go back and kind of tell what you did wrong and maybe that will bump them up. Get them more jobs. Or better pay. Or something like that.

In this way, the insecurity and instability experienced by temporary employees had the potential of pitting worker against worker, isolating them from those whom the share the most in common with, at least within the context of their work lives.

Participants in general did report having more positive interactions with other temporary workers than they did with regular employees, though this was not a universal experience. However, even these relationships tended to be superficial and tended to be framed as a way of

"passing time." Even with the issue of utilitarian social networking, social ties had the potential of becoming frayed as a result of job competition and the politics of temp work. As a result, just as the case with permanent workers, temporary coworkers did not offer participants with a consistent source of meaningful interaction. At times, such interaction did occur and made their work experiences more rewarding or enjoyable, but in many cases these interactions were stunted and became another source of isolation and separation.

Up to this point, I have been addressing mainly the ways that participants perceive their coworkers acting toward them and how these interactions sometimes created a disconnect between them and their work. However, it is important to note that a number of participants actually described willfully choosing to isolate themselves from the people around them, demonstrating the powerful alienating effects that temporary employment potentially has. "Melissa" most concisely articulated this point when I asked how much she interacted with others at work. "Oh no, cause it's temp work," she told me, "I'm there to work, I'm not there to make friends. When I work at a job, that's my focus."

Melissa's view was reinforced by an exchange I had with Andrew:

Interviewer: Do you socialize much when you're at work?

Andrew: Not too much. I've seen some people. So they might be commiserating, you know. Supporting themselves. They've been doing temp work a long time. They're not happy about it necessarily, from what I can tell.

Interviewer: You're not part of that?

Andrew: No. And it's not out of any kind of antisocial or feeling that I'm better than any of the people there. Or disliking any of the people. It's just, I sort of want to do my job and get out of there and try not to think about it until I have to go back for the next day and do it again.

For Melissa, Andrew and others, work became dominated by the practical concern of completing tasks. The relational dynamics of the work experience lost their importance.

Even some workers who reported being happy with their overall experience temping still stated a desire to limit the amount of contact they had with others. Aria, who raved about the agency she worked for, spoke differently of her coworkers,

> One lady sat there and told me about her kids, her three dogs, and the new cat they just got. And I'm just like, I don't care cause I'm not going to be here tomorrow. I don't care about your dog or your cat. And at some places, they were just over-the-top friendly. Like they were going to lunch, "do you want to come with us?" And I'm like, "no, I'm fine." I'm just there to get the work, so I don't really care about being invited to all that kind of stuff sometimes.

Thus in many situations, workers themselves were making a conscious decision to place barriers between them and the people they worked with. However, some recognized that temp work tended to encourage them to isolate themselves, and instead of doing so actually forced themselves to engage with others. Stacy, for example, told me how she approached entering into a new job,

> I made myself included. I've made myself become. . . I say hi to everybody I pass. I act like I belong because I think the chasm, the gap, comes mostly because if you feel uncomfortable and you shy away, the other people are going to do the same thing. So if you make yourself friendly and don't act uncomfortable, they're going to be more comfortable as well. So I just force myself to do that and it works.

For those participants who did choose to distance themselves from others, a variety of reasons were reported. The most basic argument offered was that it had to do with the realities of temp work itself. "I try not to get in people's business," "Justin" told me. "I understand it's a temp position. I'm not really worried about getting a permanent job there cause it's hard to make the transition when you start from a temp service. . . I can't say that I have any friends that I've

met that were permanent workers or something from one of my jobs." Because he viewed temp work to indeed be temporary and offer little chance for long-term or permanent employment, Justin rarely bothered to get to know any of the people he worked with beyond the most cursory of interactions.

Some who chose to isolate themselves while on the job did so out of concerns born out of vulnerability. I asked Jada how often she socializes with other workers, to which she responded,

> I don't really. I'm there to do my job. I'm not going to be your buddy because I don't know you. You might jeopardize me with my temp agency and say something to your boss, and then like, "we don't want her back."

The fear that opening oneself up to others increases one's vulnerability was also held by Mitchell, the skilled laborer. "I know the nature of people," he stated, "they're just naturally envious. Some people don't want to see you do better than them. I've actually had one guy on a regular job, when it came time to get a raise and I got one, and he actually said, 'they better not be paying you more than me.' I just looked at him. I say, 'dude, you just a laborer,' because at that time he pissed me off. I'm hesitant to get to know them. You never know who you're going to be hanging out with, so you have to be careful of that."

While the politics of temp work was the most commonly stated source of fear and vulnerability, Deborah actually highlighted a different reason why she was afraid to let coworkers get to know her,

> I find that every office, every locale, has a busy body, so to speak. That is, the Nosy Henry or Nosy Henrietta that wants to know all your details. I've found that early on that I would be friendly. I'm an outgoing person. Sometimes that would be my downfall. After they find out that you're single and you have two children, and you're not married, and you didn't graduate with a degree, maybe the next week you would possibly be replaced.

Confused about why she would be afraid of people finding out she was not married, I prodded

her a little more to explain what her concerns where. She then confided to me,

> There was a young lady that was coming on to me. I have a domestic partner.
> Myself. And oh then, I used to wear my hair pretty short and maybe I wouldn't
> say crossdressed, but more of an androgynous presentation. Like cowboy boots. I
> did things like that. And the young lady continued to on and on at me. And are
> you gay? And are you this? And I know better than to play into that. And they
> had a supervisor email me and ask me. And I gave in and emailed him back. And
> I don't have that job anymore. Long story short. They called the agency, and she
> went to the supervisor. This girl did. And she was a bow wow. A two bagger.
> You know what that is? It means she needs to bags over here head. She wore
> loud clothes. She wore loud perfume. She worked on the complete opposite side
> of the departmental floor. We were both account execs and she would come every
> morning and take her newspaper and throw it on my desk. And I'm trying to do
> my work. And when I wouldn't acknowledge her, then she'd try to sit in my lap.
> And on and on and on and on. And I told her, I said, oh I like those shoes, one
> day. And she went and told the supervisor that I was flirting with her. And he
> called. . . They ended up calling the agency. And I got let go, and they kept her.
> And they told me when they came, that we were both going to have to be
> reassigned. I was just irate. And I said, ok let me back up. So I went back and
> started doing landscaping work. But yes, I've had some situations.

Because of the stigma associated with her homosexuality, Deborah felt particularly vulnerable,

and therefore started to do all she could to keep her private life hidden while at work.

For other participants who chose to more or less isolate themselves from their coworkers,

they chose to do so because they simply could not relate to them. Richard almost apologetically

told me why he did not want to associate with many of the other temp workers,

> They're less affluent than me. They're in a different stage in their life. Typically,
> a lot of them are not working at all as far as I can tell. They're not the kind of
> people I would necessarily count in my social circle at all. I mean, I don't mean to
> be snooty about it at all, but it's just a fact.

Partially because of their differing status, but largely because of their different lifestyles, he was

unable to relate to many that he worked with. Once again, whether the result of the organization

of work, the cold shoulder often given by coworkers, or the choices made to isolate oneself,

another participant experienced a disconnect, not just with the work itself, but the people he

worked with.

The Experience of Being a Perpetual Outsider

Through their experiences as temp workers, participants faced a number of issues shaped

by the structural and organizational dynamics of temporary employment. Some of these issues

revolved around the nature of the work they did, whether it was its short-term nature or its status

of low work. They were sometimes isolated from the organizational cultures of the client firms,

outcast by permanent workers, and even sometimes ignored by other temps. While not all

participants experienced all of these issues at each job that they held, they all experienced some

of them in every place they worked. Only the specific constellation of factors varied. The result

was that a large majority had come to view themselves as outsiders. The word came up in so

many of the interviews, that by the end of the data collection period, I had begun asking

participants about it on those occasions when they had not mentioned it themselves. The

explanations they held about why they were viewed as outsiders varied some. Some felt it was

because of their status as temp workers, others felt it was because they were perpetually the "new

hire." In either instance, they often distanced themselves from the specifics of their work

experiences, and sometimes even from the word "temp" itself.

In explaining how "Brandon" felt about the people he worked with, he described the

general feeling of being an outsider,

> Brandon: This is probably the reason why it's hard for them to place me, I guess.
> I mean, I can't emphasize how insignificant it is now, but I have a lot more
> education and a lot more experience than a lot of people do in those jobs. So I'm

kind of a weird bolt to connect to a nut. And that's what the gal told me. She said, "I'll look for you for something, as far as a regular permanent job goes, but don't hold your breath. And as far as temp jobs go, you're going to have to be flexible about it." That's what she told me. So there again, I don't have a lot of common interests with the people I work with.

Interviewer: Did you feel like an outsider?

Brandon: "Yeah, I did. I really did."

Because he viewed his background to be significantly different from those he worked with,

having gone to college while he assumed others had not, he found it difficult to relate to them.

Some attributed this feeling of outsider to the degradation of work. For example, Steve

believed that the degradation of work encouraged workers to keep to themselves and not interact

with those around them,

Steve: When on lunch and breaks in the cafeteria, there was not a single person that would make any attempt to talk to you. I think they were beat down. You know, not that they didn't want to talk to anyone, they're just probably stuck in the cycle of knowing that those people are going to come and go anyway, and so there's no sense in trying to get them to come into the circle. I think that happens everywhere.

Interviewer: Does it make you feel like an outsider?

Steve: Oh, definitely it makes you feel like an outsider.

Interviewer: What about when you're working with other temps?

Steve: I don't think it's different. It's just the same. You're always going to feel like an outsider if you're coming in from a temp agency and no matter what your work environment is, when you're a temp you feel isolated no matter what.

Many of the workers I talked to associated this sense of alienation specifically with temp

work and not work in general.

Andrew: I mean, to me at least, implicitely, if you're there it's due to an inability to find different work, but that's just from my own vantage and perspective. You

know, it's not like I've experienced much exuberance or elation at this certain situation. And I've talked to some people where they've gone through some cycles of this. Temp work, being laid off or quitting, and then coming back in on another round, over and over. So it's not exactly exciting. . . Something people are excited about.

Janis: I think there are a lot of temp workers who have the attitude of, 'well, I'm just a temp worker, I'm not going to take any initiative.' Which, you know, sometimes I'm like that, too. Like, I don't want to be too gung ho and wear myself out, because it's not like I'm really part of this group or part of this culture. If you know that you're just going to be somewhere three days, why stress yourself?

"Sarah": I think it's nice for the quick buck, but it doesn't do anything. I didn't think it was self-satisfying at all. The last week was kind of a struggle. It was just, I don't care. I left work irritated most of the time. And something I noticed, the people who had been there [at the call center] a long time, I know it sounds stupid, but they were like zombies. It was like they were completely devoid of emotion. Completely. I would hate to end up like that. It would be awful. A very sad existence.

On one hand, many of the workers felt that the desperate situation temp workers were in, in addition to the instability of temporary employment took a mental toll on those who experienced it. Others, like Sarah, believed that the type of work they were asked to do also had a damaging effect if people had to do it for too long.

The consequence of the degradation of internal meaning associated with temporary employment was that several of the participants had developed negative or utilitarian attitudes toward work in general and not just temp work. Workers would make statements such as, "I do it and go home," which Dante told me, or, "You know, I kind of feel like I want to say I won't be here long," which was said by "Joane." Perhaps the ideal example of the utilitarian approach adopted by several participants was an exchange that I had with Jada,

Interviewer: How do you feel about being a temp?

Jada: The types of jobs I'm doing. I could care less how they fucking treat me. It's the type of jobs that they stick us with. They don't want to pay you for real. Like [that agency]. [That agency] I think is exploiting people for real. Because them types of jobs, they'll send you out and get paid twenty dollars and stuff like that.

Interviewer: So what is the importance of work?

Jada: Money.

Justin talked about how his view of work, or what he had gotten out of it, had changed since relying primarily on temp work, telling me, "I've gotten pride out of certain jobs I've done. Usually not for temp jobs, but sometimes from temp jobs. But after a while, at this point in my life, I don't really care."

The most frustrating conversation I had was with "Dalton," who had bounced from temp job to temp job after being dishonorably discharged from the military. Only in his early twenties, I was curious about what his favorite job would be. "What would your ideal job be?" I asked him. He replied, "well, it depends on what you're looking for." "But for you," I reiterated, "what would be your dream job?" After some thought, he stated, "work's work, it's all the same to me. . . it's all the same." He had become so alienated from work that he no longer had any feelings toward it whatsoever. He no longer had any expectation that work should be something that he finds meaningful in and of itself.

Not all of the participants developed such cynical notions of work as a result of their experiences as temp workers. Some may not have found their temp work to be particularly rewarding or fulfilling, but they still had the expectation that work should be. "Alonzo," in criticizing day labor arrangements, spoke of what he thought work should be like,

> If you're doing something you like to do, you're looking forward to getting up and going to work in the morning. It should be self-fulfilling. A lot of [the temp jobs] made you feel like you were degraded. The day to day labor. That make you feel degraded because they put everybody on the same level as a dope fiend or the smoker or whatever. Or a homeless person. Just look down at you like that. Man, I do feel degraded when I do the day to day labor. It's not real, man. Who works that? I don't know anybody who got a permanent job get paid everyday.

In similar fashion, when Curtis and I were discussing career-type jobs, he stated,

> Curtis: Well, I think when you have a job it gives you a sense of meaning and purpose and I think it makes you feel a lot better about yourself.

I asked him if temp work fulfilled that, to which he quickly responded, "No, not really."

I will end this section with one final brief anecdote about how one participant resisted the alienating dynamics she experienced when placed at a bank:

> The bank was really nice. The situation was that the woman who had been the phone operator was leaving and I think they had hired a new person, but she hadn't been able to start yet. So I worked there a week, or maybe it was even two weeks, just answering the phone and routing people's calls to the proper person. The only weird part was there was a pretty strict dress code. Like, I couldn't show my tattoos at all, and so I went out and bought some fake Republican nice-lady dresses. I looked at it as "I am an actress and I am playing the role of the operator at a bank and these are my costumes." And so that made it kind of fun rather than "ugh, I got to wear this stupid Republican dress."

Even in a situation where she had to present herself in a way completely foreign to her, Janis did not passively allow a sense of separation to overwhelm her. Instead, she redefined her situation in a way that she could cope and in doing so, reconnected herself with the workplace situations she was experiencing. In some sense, it is this process of finding a new connection to one's work that the following chapters detail.

Conclusions

The experience of being a "temp worker" is highly varied. Situations can change on a moments notice and no two jobs ever seem to be exactly the same. The types of work participants reported doing varied dramatically, from catering to office work to factory work. Firms treated them differently, some making employees feel at home, but more often making them feel like outsiders. Other workers sometimes welcomed them with open arms, but more often ignored them or even treated them with hostility. All the specific details of temp work ultimately left participants feeling little connection to the actual work they were doing. There was a disconnect. The work itself and the social relations of the workplace were often alienating.

This did not mean that participants found no value or meaning in what they did. Rather, they tended to abstract their experiences of temp work and connect them to other things that were going on in their lives. Through these life course narratives, workers were able to connect to their work in a way they were unable to otherwise. Temping became about getting one's college education, or finding one's career job, or moving into retirement. It became about recovering from a tragedy experienced in one's lives, or more problematically became a source of crisis. It became about escaping economic marginality, or as a way of escaping contemporary capitalism. The unique characteristics of temp work, its unstable, sporadic, and fragmented nature, that causes so much frustration, were either marginalized or incorporated into life course narratives as functional and beneficial. In the following chapters, I examine the ways in which these experiences from outside of the workplace were used by participants to make sense of their experiences of being temps.

Chapter 3

Lives in Transition and Crisis

> *Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense in their everday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling they are often quite correct. What ordinary men are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, and neighborhood. . .*
>
> C. Wright Mills (1959)

The previous quote from Mills rings familiar to all sociologists, especially those who teach introductory courses in sociology. Yet these seemingly timeless words still speak a remarkable truism today in terms of how the average person tries to understand the realities of his/her life. Experiences are explained in personal terms embedded in a person's immediate social milieu. The participants in this study are no different. Within our interviews, they each constructed a personal story that explains their experiences as temp workers in terms of how they relate to other aspects of their personal lives. These temp workers created what I refer to as *life course narratives* on which they relied to make their work externally meaningful by connecting their work experiences to other life experiences. Such narratives were crucial for workers to make sense of their work lives as the organizational and interactional dynamics of work, discussed in the previous chapters, provided them with so few insights. Indeed, the life course narratives created by participants tended to minimize these problematic aspects of their temp work experiences, including it's isolating, unstable, and fragmented nature.

As a sociological concept, the life course is used to illuminate the interplay between structural dynamics and personal experiences as we age (Bruckner and Mayer, 2005; Elder, 1975; Heinz and Kruger, 2001; Hogan, 1978). Life course studies, by their nature, aim at

uncovering the patterns that appear as people progress through identifiable stages of life and illustrating those social forces that contribute to, or cause people to diverge from, these expected progressions (Elder, 1998; Hogan, 1978). While respondents may have had a basic intuitive understanding of how broader structures were shaping their experiences and pushing them along their paths toward and away temp work, they generally lacked the conceptual tools to bring these forces into focus.

Not only were the work lives of the participants being shaped by the economic realities of post-Fordist society, but by other structures of contemporary society, many of which were most acutely experienced during specific stages of the life course. Passage through young adulthood, whether defined by college or the pursuit of one's first career job, and retirement shaped lives in ways that the participants had only partial control over. Illness and tragedy sometimes disrupted lives in unanticipated ways. Life course narratives were the means through which they made sense of the ways their lives were shaped by these broader realities, but within terms that were deeply personal. Within these life course narratives, temp work was constructed by participants as a means of facilitating a transition from one stage of the life course to another, or recovering from crises that have disrupted the expected progression that they believe their lives should have. Temp work was not simply viewed as the pragmatic utility of a paycheck, but became symbolically linked with notions of transition and recovery.

Temping through Young Adulthood

Recently I was in a meeting on diversity issues when the student who was speaking remarked, "it's ok to have a crappy job if you're going to college." In this student's case, he was illustrating why he had become motivated to go to college as a nontraditional student. After

being trapped in a dead-end job for years, he had the realization that such a job may be suitable if he were using it to work his way through college, but was no longer tolerable as a goal in and of itself. Shortly thereafter he enrolled in classes. For several of the participants in this study, temp work has taken on a similar meaning. The instability of temp work encouraged participants who either attended college or had just completed their degree to connect these work experiences with the more predictable trajectory of their college careers and aspirations.

Temping is perceived as a means for the students in this study to balance the competing economic and institutional demands of college and successfully navigate their transition through the young adult phase of the life course. Even for those young participants not attending college, temp work acts as a temporary means of cushioning the transition into adulthood as they pursue other plans that they hope will result in the fulfillment of their aspirations. The fragmented and unstable nature of temp work was acceptable because they framed it as a short-term detour that facilitated their ability to achieve broader, unrelated plans. As many of these participants told me, nearly word for word each time, "it's called temporary for a reason."

It is within this context that several of the students I interviewed took on temp jobs. The most straightforward example of the use of temp work to work one's way through college was given by "Sarah." A senior in college studying biology, she had just taken her first temp job the prior summer. She had been placed in a call center where she answered phone calls regarding student loans. She worked there for five or six weeks before she chose to leave at the beginning of the fall semester.

There were two main factors that lead Sarah to apply for temp work. The previous academic year, Sarah had studied abroad as part of a student exchange program. Once she

returned, she needed to start working again immediately. Prior to leaving, she had worked at a

local grocery store, and her job was still waiting for her upon her return. However, when she

went back to work, she had a new manager that she considered to be sexist:

> I'm considering reporting it. He has a thing against women in general. Our female manager is underneath him. He messes with her schedule. He messes with my schedule. The entire department is really pretty awful. I asked if he could schedule me for more hours, and he swore up and down, 'yeah, I'll schedule you more than six hours a week.' And never did. So I got the other job because I needed the money. When you work six hours a week and you're not in school, you have nothing to do but spend money that you don't have.

Finding another job was particularly important to Sarah because of her college career.

She is paying her own way through school, while trying not to rely on student loans (though she

did have to take one out that semester). The extra money she made during the summer allowed

her to take an unpaid internship in a laboratory assisting in a study on flies. She also planned on

volunteering in another lab the following semester,

> I might help out a second lab. I've been speaking with this graduate student. She studies dogs and wolves. . . And that's exactly what I would like to learn about. I'll work for free, and learn everything I can.

By taking on these volunteer positions, Sarah was hoping to build her resume and increase her

ability to choose where she wanted to go for graduate school. Temp work and its wage (which is

easily the most money that she had earned in such a short period of time) allowed her to engage

in these career-building activities and experience a more fulfilling collegiate career.

Another student, "Aria," found similar meaning in the temp work that she did, though her

arrival at this point had been more trying than that experienced by Sarah. Aria was raised by her

grandmother in Texas after she was abandoned by her parents who she said were in the grips of

drug addiction. Because her grandmother had limited resources, any chance of attending college

depended on her ability to pay her own way. To do so, Aria worked between 50 and 60 hours a week at an amusement park in order to build up her savings, always with the plan of using this money to support herself once she went to college. She was also set to receive some scholarship money and student loans in order to pay for her tuition costs.

Upon arriving in Kansas, all of Aria's well-laid plans fell apart.

> When I got here, I didn't get all my financial aide like I was supposed to. They said there was something that happened to my paperwork and all that other stuff. I never even got a definitive answer as to why I never got that scholarship money. So I never really knew. So what ended up happening was I had to pay the university out of my savings to pay for my classes, and so my savings was depleted because I had to pay my rent and all that other stuff. And that's what prompted my to go to [the temp agency], because I was destitute.

She was quickly placed by the agency at a firm who's regular secretary was ill, and this resulted in a series of short term placements. Later, she started working student work positions at the university along with occasional temp jobs when she had the time. At the time of our interview, she was working as a temp in the office of the agency itself.

In this instance, temporary employment allowed Aria to find a certain level of stability at a moment when she was unsure if she was going to be able to continue her collegiate career. But it also promised to continue facilitating her progress through this stage of her life. Aria intended to go on to graduate school at a different university, and the manager of the agency through which she worked had already made arrangements with the local branch of the agency to get her work if she needs it. As a result, she could continue her course work in African American studies without worrying about her financial stability. Aria's professional aspiration was to become a college professor. While her experience as a temp worker was not directly related to this goal, it allowed her to overcome the economic hurdles that had stood in her path.

For college students, money was not necessarily the only roadblock to getting a college degree and transitioning smoothly into adulthood. Newfound freedom and a care free attitude resulted in "Curtis" taking a more unconventional route in getting his degree. Like many others, Curtis went to college straight after high school. Halfway through his Sophomore year, however, he was arrested for a DUI after he "borrowed" a car that he thought was his friend's in order to go to Octoberfest. The resulting legal and financial troubles temporarily forced him to drop out of school and move back in with his parents.

Eventually, Curtis went back to school, but could only afford to do so on a part time basis. It was during this time that he first started using temporary employment. "I pretty much had to work a full time job," he told me. "I guess when I first started, I wasn't even going to school that first semester," he continued, "but after that it was part time school and working full time." He would also start working weekends as a bartender to help make ends meet.

The financial consequences of Curtis's legal problems were intensified due to the economic realities of his family background. The son of two factory workers, Curtis could not rely on his parents for assistance once his troubles began. He was faced with the choice of following in his parents' footsteps and taking a job at the local factory, or finding a new way of paying for his legal fees and college. Through the use of temp work, he was able to slowly finish getting his business degree. Once he finished his degree, he continued to work through temp agencies as he looked for professional work. Now in his late twenties, Curtis may now be on the verge of entering the next stage of his life. Two weeks after our interview, Curtis started working at an insurance office (not as a temp) and tentatively planned on building a career out of it.

For the previous three workers, temporary employment intertwined directly with their experiences as college students, and it was within this constellation of social roles that they perceive meaning in the work they do. However, for two other participants, "Alex" and "Sam" temp work was less directly related to their collegiate careers. For Alex, temp work was a bridge between his missionary work as a Mormon and his college career. For Sam, temp work was a means of re-acclimating after spending a year teaching overseas. Temp work, for them, is meaningful to the extent that it is buffering the economic effects of a prolonged or "nontraditional" transition from adolescent to young adult to adult.

Within the Church of Latter Day Saints, the ritual of the mission serves as a gateway into adulthood and though not doctrinally required the failure to do missionary work results in significant social stigma. Church members readying for their missionary work must submit an application, participate in a series of interviews, and ultimately assigned to a mission by a church council. According to Alex, there were a potential 307 missions that he could have been assigned, and he was chosen to go to Haiti. After attending a training center in Utah (during which time he learned Haitian Creole), plans changed. "There was huge social unrest," he explained, "people kidnapping and killings and not good things." "So they're like, 'ok, you're actually not going to Haiti anymore. We'd like you to stay alive.' So then I ended up going down to Florida. . . And I spent some time in the Bahamas."

The potential hazards of his missionary work, and Alex's resulting reassignment were not the only challenges he faced. He was part of a large family, supported by the modest incomes of his father who is a blue-collar worker and his mother who is a secretary. Because of his family's limited resources, Alex worked full time immediately following high school, first at a call center

and then at a local restaurant, in order to save up the $10,000 necessary to pay for his missionary work. As a result, he did not begin his mission until he was almost twenty.

Upon his return from his mission, Alex immediately faced his next challenge: attending college. His mission had drained his savings and he needed to find a way to pay tuition. It was at this point that he turned to one of the local temporary agencies. He was first placed in a janitorial position that lasted only two weeks. After completing that assignment, he was placed at a call center where he provided assistance to people seeking information regarding the repayment of student loans. Ironically, this was the same call center with which Alex had been directly employed prior to leaving for his missionary work. This temporary work, however, was perceived by Alex to be just a holdover until he was able to begin attending college. Though he did report finding a certain amount of satisfaction in aiding people with their student loans, it was not part of his long term plans. In this way, he had incorporated the instability of temp work as a functional part of his narrative.

When I asked him if he could see himself working as a temp in the future, he responded, "it's sort of in passing. [It is a] means to arrive somewhere." "Hopefully, I'll be married and have a family," he added. "Be working in a job that pays me well enough that I can have those nicer things. Have savings to provide for my children to go to school for college and stuff. Have savings for when life happens." To accomplish this, Alex planned to go to college and receive a degree in business. Temp work was only his way of earning enough money to get his foot in the door.

For several participants, such as Alex, temp work was a tool that facilitated attending college and transitioning into fully adult roles and occupations. As such, working temp jobs was

symbolically linked to college. Other participants did not make sense of their temping

experiences by connecting them to their experiences as college students, and some had never

attended college or received a degree. Rather, these participants viewed temping as a means to

supplement their efforts to find fulfilling careers and fully transition into the next stage of their

lives.   For example, "Sam" received his bachelor's degree prior to taking his first temp job. For

him, temping was less about getting a college education than had more to do with trying to find

direction in their life. Through temping, they were able to give themselves more time as they

tried to decide what they want their futures to hold. Others, such as "Kieth" and "Steve," had

distinct plans that they wanted to do with their lives and were using temp work to get them

through while they tried to make their plans come to fruition.

Sam went straight to college from high school, and through financial aide and support

from his father never had to work as a student. After graduating, he began doing temp work,

mainly construction jobs. When I asked Sam on why he started doing temp work, he simply

replied, "basically I just wanted something for the summer." While working at one of these

assignments, he received an email offering a rather unique opportunity.

> I was working the temp jobs and I got an email from a recruiter aking if I was
> interested in teaching in Korea.. I was a little skeptical. I wasn't remotely
> qualified for that position, but I guess the demand I guess the demand is so high
> that they will just take who they can get. [Where I was placed] was a private
> institute. It was like after their Korean school, they would go to our school.

Sam ultimately accepted the job, telling me, "I felt like I needed to get out of my comfort

zone. . ., kind of change my perspective on everything." After coming back to the United States

after teaching in Korea for the past year, Sam had left his comfort zone again. His experience

with the Korean children had inspired him to consider teaching as a career, but when I asked him

where he saw himself in the future, he remained unsure,

> There's so many things up in the air right now. I'm working a temp job. I don't
> have my substitute license. Maybe I'll go back to school to be a teacher. I don't
> know. There are so many things that are undecided right now.

Expanding on his feelings about currently doing temp work, he continued,

> Right now it's good for me. I'm waiting on my substitute license, so when I get
> that, I don't know how much work I'm going to get through that. But I'm sure
> I'm going to need occasional days of work through the temp agency when I'm not
> substitute teaching. So at least until I figure out if I'm going to another country. I
> won't know where I'm going. It's working for me.

For Sam then, working as a temp was buying him the time he needs to figure out exactly what his

plans were as he began his transition out of the young adult/college stage of his life and began to

pursue a career. Until he was able to solidify his plans and put them into motion, he was content

working in an electronics division of a local manufacture.

Unlike Sam, Keith had a clear view of what he wants to do with his life. While he was

still using temp work as a way of buying himself time, he was using this time to work toward his

big break. A drummer in an established local band, he and his bandmates had been trying to

gradually develop their musical careers into something that they could make a living from;

> We got together in like 2002, and we played locally for about a year and a half,
> two years. And then we started booking some one week tours here and there, and
> just going out on the road every six months or so. Usually just small legs of one
> area. You know, any city from here to Texas. Or we'll go east. We went to New
> York one time. But yeah, while I'm doing that, the temp work is just easier to
> have. You can leave and come back. If you tell a full/time employer, I got to
> leave for a week to go to Los Angeles and play with my band, they're going to be
> like, "see ya."

Up to this point, the band was not able to provide Keith and his fiancee the money they need to support themselves. The short tours usually drew enough money to pay for the costs of the tours, but rarely provided any actual income. In order to make ends meet, Keith relied on temp work because it provided him the type of flexibility he needed to continue working with the band and also gave him quick placement into new jobs upon his return. When I asked him if he sees himself as a temp, he quickly replied, "No. It's just something that I do to get by. That I don't really want to do forever." Keith saw himself primarily as a drummer; temp work was just the reality of a struggling musician.

However, the pressure to find a sustaining career was building. Keith had a child on the way, and the band was nearing a defining point in their career. While they had received some favorable comments from executives at a couple major labels, none were impressed enough to offer a contract. The band planned to do a showcase in L.A. for another label, but if they were not offered a deal, they were going to sit down and discuss their future as a band,

> We've been contacted by labels, it just seems like it's just getting ready to happen. The music industry, they just don't want to grow you anymore. They'll sign you if you've already sold 50,000 records to all your friends and people in the underground. But they won't sign you and try to build you like they did in the '60's. I mean, the Beatles didn't happen overnight. I give it another year, year and a half on this band. We will probably not continue, especially after this [showcase] thing. If that doesn't pan out and we can't find a better label than the one we're on, then we're going to pull the plug. If that happens, I will probably look into school. Or moving.

Even in this worse case scenario, Keith did not mention temp work as either a long term option or even as a possible means of finding permanent employment. Outside of his experience as a drummer, temp work lost any significance within his life or how he saw his life developing.

While Keith continued to struggle to make it as a professional musician, Steve was

temping and biding his time for what he felt was going to be his big breakout when he turned

forty,

> I'm 32 now. I'm trying to let myself relax. I sold books door-to-door, twelve and a half hours a day, six days a week for four summers. It was amazing. It was intense. And I sat with twenty, thirty families a day. So I've sat with five to ten thousand families. And I've had a lot of men with their families sitting around me say, "hey look, I can tell that you're somebody. You're going to be someone. You're going to make a lot of money. But just remember this: life doesn't start until you're forty. And if you're someone in a position of power, you wouldn't trust somebody until they're around the age of forty. And until you get to about that age, nobody's going to believe a fucking word that you're saying, cause most people don't really understand what's going on until they're about forty. Look at me, now I'm forty five. I can barely work. I'm broken down. And now I'm being handed all these responsibilities and all these great opportunities, but I'm so damned tired. I don't have the energy." I finally said, "you're right. I could probably end up making a couple of hundred thousand dollars a year at the age of 21 or 22 and that will happen to me. I'll be 40 years old, I won't have any energy." So I took their advice. I'm on a time line. I made my life plan when I was 18, so I'm kind of waiting.

While Steve was waiting, he was not doing so passively. He viewed himself to be an

artist. When I asked him what things were most important to his identity, he told me, "just being

creative, making art, making love, making. . . you know, creating things." "I'm a poet," he

continued, "and an actor and a producer and other things." In this capacity, he has made several

television commercials, edited videos of fashion shows, organized numerous other shows of

various types. Eventually he wanted to develop these activities into film production house, but

he wanted to spend a few more years traveling and establishing connections. So for the time

being, he is content to take advantage of the occasional opportunity while supplementing his

earnings with temp work. The sporadic, fragmented work experiences he had as a temp where of

no major significance. His greatest annoyance about temp work was not its temporary nature, but

rather that the agency he worked through refused to place him in clerical jobs because of his gender.

Furthermore, it was within the context of his artistic endeavors that he made sense of his temp work experiences and differentiated himself from the experiences he perceived other temp workers having,

> For a lot of people, their careers are actually jobs like a doctor or a lawyer or an accountant or something like that. So for those people that are doing temp work, they must be destroyed career wise, thinking that they are not on the right track with their life. But for me, well there's never going to be a job making a move. I have to get that on my own and no one's ever going to be able to help me do that. I don't really need to have anything from a job that's fulfilling for my life.

Steve's views on temp work was embedded in his spirituality. He described himself as a "Buddhist Rastafarian Moonie," in which he took a holistic view of his life. Temp work, art and other aspects of his life were linked and, from his perspective, none of it was"real" and needed to be taken less seriously.

Much like Steve, Kevin had big plans for his future, though he differed in that he did not attempt to minimize his ambitions. Like Steve and Sam, Kevin already received his degree and had only started working temp jobs eight months before our interview. In diametric opposition to the goals of Steve, Kevin had the goal of retiring at the age of thirty five, and instead of using temp work as a way to delay devotion to career opportunities, he was using it as an attempt to speed the process along.

> I use temp work to pretty much pay my bills. And the I use my real job. . . I use that for retirement savings and business investments. Like I said, I'm an entrepreneurship major, so I use a lot of money I have for business opportunities or investments in real estate, stuff like that.

For Kevin, the promise of early retirement was the promise of empowerment. It took me a while to understand what he meant when he talked of retirement, as I was assuming he meant retiring to a life of leisure. Instead, he viewed retirement as the point at which you become self employed. Upon retirement, he and his girlfriend wanted to establish a number of charities, mentorship programs, and possibly own their own restaurant. However, his real passion was in motivational speaking,

> I'm really trying to get into motivational speaking. That's my passion. And there's no really kind of skill set or job industry that gets you into entry level motivational speaking. So you kind of have to go out there on your own. [I want to do] all these [ventures]. Cause I believe instead of having one stream of income, you have to have multiple streams of income. That's the true way to gain success and wealth. When you have multiple paychecks coming in, then you have more money to redirect to other ventures. That's why I use, with like the temp jobs.

Even though Kevin did not speak of temp work as being fulfilling or inherently rewarding, he did view it as being part of a bigger picture in which it facilitated his efforts in other areas that he did find personally meaningful. Temp work, in this sense, had become externally meaningful in that he viewed it as a means to be able to pursue more rewarding work such as giving motivational speeches.

For the workers in this section, temp work was not a source of self actualization or fulfillment. None of them considered temporary employment to be a long term strategy, but rather viewed it as a tool to negotiate and cushion the transition into adulthood and adult roles. Through the life course narratives that they create, they connect their experiences as temp workers with a broader life trajectory which was still full of promise and the potential of finding a career path that can foster self actualization and personal growth. For some, this connection

resides within their statuses as college students. Contingent employment (both temp work and part/time work) was constructed as a complement to their academic careers by providing the money and flexible schedules that allow them to focus primarily on school rather than work. Other participants do not associate temp work with college life, but rather have occupational aspirations that they are working toward. Though they find these budding careers to be exciting and rewarding on a psychological level, they have yet to provide a sustainable income. In these ways, temp work was not only rendered significant, but the negative aspects highlighted in chapters 2 and 3 were either minimized or reconstructed as a functional part of their plans.

Temping in Retirement Life

Much like the previous participants who understand their experiences with temp work in relation to their transition into adulthood, a number of interviewees locate their temp work experiences in their transition into retirement. Retirement marks the arrival of a new stage in the life course defined by its own particular structures and cultural expectations (Atchley, 1982; Han and Moen, 1999; Uhlenberg, 1992). Competitive labor markets and the increased participation of women in the paid economy has increased both retirement and economic marginalization of retirees (Treas and Bengtson, 1982; Uhlenberg, 1992). Simultaneously, increases in life expectancy and health has resulted in an elderly population with the resources and abilities to continue to make significant contributions to the society (Han and Moen, 1999; Moen, 2003).

Several of the participants in this study have found themselves moving through this process, though their entry into retirement varied significantly. Walter retired at 65, while several others took early retirement, either by choice or forced by health or professional

regulations.[15] Regardless of the situations surrounding their retirement, each framed their experiences with temp work with their experiences of retirement.

Walter's experiences illustrated the basic ways in which the retirees interviewed used temp work to adjust to the social realities of retirement. For the past two years he has been working a parking lot attendant for local sporting events through a temporary employment agency. When I ask him why he was temping, he simply replied, "just for fun." "Been retired for a couple of years," he continued, "so I'm just doing this for something to do." He had worked in an administrative office at a local university for 36 years, and like many new retirees, has been adjusting to a life that is no longer dominated by employment.

After telling me about his career at the university, I was curious about whether Walter's work at the sporting events allowed him to keep feeling connected to the campus. He agreed and added, "and then I can see some of the people that I already know. And I still go by the office in [the administrative building] and visit with the people that I know on all the floors over there." Upon retiring, old relationships were either lost or redefined, and for Walter, working at the sporting events was part of his way to maintain those old relationships and sources of identity. In

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[15]Despite the creation of this "normative retirement regime" during the Fordist era, recent decades has seen retirement itself become "deinstitutionalized" or "destandardized" as the actual age range of retirement has expanded (Guillemard and Rein, 1993; Guillemard and van Gunsteren, 1991).   By 1990, fewer than 40% of workers move directly into full retirement. Most workers engage in some combination of partial retirement, early retirement, or reverse retirement (Ruhn, 1990). Like more traditional retirement forms, these types of retirement are shaped by a variety of factors, many of which lie beyond the control of any particular worker. Economic factors play a primary role in the decision of early retirement (Bazzoli, 1985), though a variety of push and pull factors also influence the decision, including health and interest in leisure (Shultz, et al., 1998). Partial retirement is also effected by broad social forces, including labor markets, pension policies, and agism, that are antagonistic toward continued labor participation by retirees (Gustman and Steinmeier, 1984; Latulippe and Turner, 2000; Kim and Devaney, 2005).

his particular office, several of the staff had been there for nearly as long as he had and he had

developed a strong sense of community with them. While his temp work did not provide him

with the same sense of connection, it did help as he adjusted to the changing relationships.

Walter's retirement was not in all manners stereotypical. He and his wife were raising

one of their granddaughters, who Walter originally referred to as his daughter before quickly

correcting himself. The girl's mother had a troubled background and was adopted by Walter and

his wife when she was young. She had undiagnosed ADHD and had struggled keeping a job

because of the challenges associated with it. The father, who had spent time in jail, had managed

to find steady full/time work, but could only afford to care for one of his daughters. As Walter

explained, "it was a choice of either taking this granddaughter on or else putting her in the state

system. And I didn't want to do that. Yeah, it was just time to retire." When we spoke, they had

just taken the next step and become the child's legal guardians, primarily to make it easier to give

her medical treatment. Like her mother, she had ADHD and as a result required a great deal of

attention, which Walter was only to happy to provide.

Along with caring for his four-year-old granddaughter, Walter's retirement was spent

helping his wife as she struggles with a chronic illness. On the day of our interview, he was

actually preparing for an overnight trip for a clinical trial that his wife has been participating in.

The combination of his wife's illness and their custody of their granddaughter has resulted in

Walter experiencing a greater amount of responsibility and stress than he would have ever

imagined his retirement would have. It is within this context that temp work has taken on an

additional meaning for him:

But I just, like I said, I do the temporary thing just for the privilege of getting out of the house. And a little extra income, not that I really need it. But something to do. . . I do it just for the enjoyment sake of getting out.

He was completely devoted to his family life and relishes spending time with his granddaughter, and we spent a significant amount of time in our interview talking about her and what they do together. However, working occasionally as a temp allowed him to find time that is his separate from his family.

Another participant, John, retired begrudgingly due to a convergence of a number factors. After graduating from college, he had joined the air force and served in the Vietnam war. With his military experience, he was able to get a job as a commercial pilot. Later, an ex-wife introduced him to a president of a major corporation who hired him as his personal pilot. Unfortunately, when he turned 60 he was forced to retire (the mandatory retirement age for pilots has since been raised to 65). Not working as a pilot had been a tough adjustment for him,

My new axiom is 'life's no fun without a Gulf Stream.' I miss my Gulf Stream. You can't even imagine. That's the problem. You can't even imagine what I used to do. I mean, flying a 51 million dollar airplane for 14 people, when a 737 costs 38 million for 120 people. . . Sometimes we stayed in the best hotels. Sometimes we stayed in castles.

Around the same time, John's parents began to experience health problems. His father died and his mother was diagnosed with dementia. Though his mother resided in a nursing home, John decided to move back into his parents home in order to be close to her in her last years. "I still call it my parents' house even though my dad's died, my mother's in a nursing home," he told me. "And god forbid, when that time comes, she's going to be 92 this month, then I'll go back [home] and start life again."

Despite the primary reason for John moving back is because he wanted to be able to be near his mother, he has also taken the move as an opportunity to reevaluate his life and what he feels are personal shortcomings or excesses.

> I was married for four months then we got divorced. I said, "what am I doing? I've got all this, this, and this. But my personal relationships are tagging bottom, where my family is very stable. Why me?". . . So I went four months and ended up giving away $960,000, which was nothing because I made tons of it [snaps fingers]. But being back in this house and going through that hurt mad me realize I'm going to work this out.

It is within the context of this self reflection that temp work takes on part of its meaning for John. He finds himself redefining his old materialistic trappings, as he told me, "there are a lot of people who are very rich, but very few people who are wealthy." Temp work, and also his work as a substitute teacher, are a way of humbling himself. When talking about his work ethic and how he views about the temp jobs he takes on, he told me, "as my mom used to say, 'if its honest, don't be ashamed to do honest work, but do a good job.'" This aspect of self reflection and in some sense redemption introduces an aspect of a number of participants perceived temp work. Because of how temp work was integrated into the life course narratives they created, temp work took on a moral component. It invoked judgements on the self. One is a "good" or "capable" person, or in the case of some, "flawed" or "deficient." This idea will be further developed in the following section on life crises and in Chapter 5.

Another way that John connected his experience temping with his retirement was with his recent focus on his mortality and on leaving a legacy. He was currently planning the development of an Asian cultural center as a way of giving back to the community. He had been working with a world renown architect and a construction company based in New York. The

current plan was budgeted at 120 million dollars. Pulling up a map, he started to describe the

project to me,

> I'll have all the Japanese arts from Judo all the way to Ikibana. . . you know
> calligraphy with the best instructors. And they'll be seminars. And instead of a
> weekend, they'll be there for like a month so people can schedule time. Or two
> months. That come in around the country. That far one [building] over there is
> going to be a separate facility. So in case they need to have meetings in our area,
> they will have there own separate facility and garden to meet in. Then we're
> going to have a library. A Tea House is going to be up there. A tea House,
> museum, and theater. And then we're going to have a hotel or possibly villas. It's
> a huge enterprise. About three hundred jobs, in all these buildings, in a garden
> setting, spread out over five hundred acres. Its my concept and that's what I'm
> trying to do for the state. I'm hoping this will be my legacy.

At the time of our interview, John was putting together a proposal for a $2,000,000 grant from

the commerce department, working with his investment advisors to plan out the overall funding

of the project, and working with his development team on finalizing both the architectural

designs and the business plan. Temp work had become a means of escape,

> So that's the reason why I work for [the temp agency] in the short period. I have a
> complete mind change with my project to detail. So it keeps me at peace
> mentally. So my organizational skills are still functioning. I'm doing something
> for someone else, and I'm thinking all the time through a different medium. And
> that's what you have to do, otherwise you would go crazy in this basement and
> constantly on the phone. So you space yourself away and do something totally
> different.

Retirement has not been a shift toward leisure for John, but rather a refocusing of his efforts and

ambitions. Part of his journey into retirement has been a introspective one of self actualization,

which in turn has become an outwardly directed drive to make a lasting contribution to his

community. Temp work has become meaningful to him to the extent that he feels that it is

helping him progress through his journey.

Another retiree, Patricia, exemplified another way in which experience with temp work could be integrated into one's experience of retirement. Still in her forties, she retired from her job in an administrative office for a local municipality after more than twenty years of service. When I first asked her why she began temping, she immediately mentioned her retirement, "I just retired the first of January and I needed something to do. I was bored. It's [retirement] different." As we continued to talk, it became apparent to me that temp work for Patricia was not just a response to retirement, but a strategy for dealing with the unique realities presented by *early* retirement.

The decision to retire itself was one that Patricia wrestled with. She contemplated it for nearly a year and a half before finally deciding to do so. Ultimately, she saw it as an opportunity to begin doing the things that she always wanted to do, and even things that she had not thought of prior to retirement. "I'm kind of starting a new chapter in my life," she said. "I mean, there are things that until I retired, I would have never thought about doing. So those things are coming around and I want to do those things. I start taking motorcycle classes tomorrow night and I'm going to buy a Harley." When I asked her if she was planning on taking a road trip on her motorcycle, she answered, "I have a feeling it will happen. We've got nothing but time, so I think we'll probably do it."

The issue of time was central to how Patricia views temp work. On a very basic level, she viewed it as a supplement to her retirement income, which was particularly useful since she had recently bought her childhood home. But what was particularly important was the organization of temp work that offered her the flexibility to have the type of retirement that she wanted,

> With temp work, I always know I've got a check coming every month, and the temp work is just like gravy and allows me to do the things that I wasn't able to while I was working because normally you can't take that much time off. So the temp work is probably enabling me to really have the retirement I want to have. Because, number one, I'm not really as old as most retired people are, and I want to do a lot of things. I can honestly say that when I thought about retiring, I just thought, ok, I won't get up and go to work every day. Oh boy, did that last just about that long [*snaps fingers*]. It's like, ok, what am I going to do now? So it's amazing what you can do or not do when you retire.

Temp work was a way for Patricia to keep busy, but in a way that offered her the flexibility to do those rewarding activities and have those fulfilling experiences that she wanted to define her retirement.

Since her retirement, Patricia had been placed in a variety of temp jobs. Initially, she worked in a dog food factory, and more was then placed in the office of one of the local temp agencies. This type of work was not what she typically wanted as part of her retirement. In the past summer, she was placed in a position with a golf association doing data entry and registration. One of the perks of this assignment was that she was able to travel to California for a golfing event. It was this type of work that she wants to focus on, as she told me, "I'm actually going to go back to the [association] and work 4 ½ months for that. My goal next year is to work that 4, 4 ½ months and not have to work the rest of the year. I've also shecked into doing temp work in Alaska during the tourist season and spending four months up there and just doing that." By focusing on temp jobs of this nature, she was attempting to integrate her experiences of temping with her broader goals of travel and leisure which dominated her expectations of retirement.

One final participant, Richard, began his early retirement in a different fashion. While Patricia chose retirement on her own terms, Richard was forced into retirement because of health

concerns. A former CEO of a local firm and a financial consultant, he chose to retire when he

suffered a stroke several years ago,

> It was because of the pressure I was under. And I just reassessed my life and said,
> this is not worth it. I loved what I was doing, but the pressure was like, I ended up
> going to the hospital. I had a severe headache, 220 over 130 blood pressure. I
> was off the scale. They were really concerned. So I just decided it wasn't worth
> it. I enjoyed what I was doing, but it wasn't worth it, so that's when I scaled back.

I asked him if this was when he started doing temp work, to which he answered, "yeah, basically

the retirement lifestyle is great, but the money sucks. So you got to find something. I took early

retirement on social security, and even with my wife working, it doesn't cover what we need to

have. So I supplement it with part/time work."

For Richard then, temp work did not function so much to give him something that

structures and occupies his time (as is the case with Patricia), but rather helps him deal with the

financial realities that early, unplanned retirement created. He had taken odd jobs including work

as a parking lot attendant at local football and basketball games. He worked in the hospitality

suites at the local race track, and mowed grass at one of the area golf courses. Separate from his

temporary placements, he also started to do a small amount of consulting on the side, working

primarily with start-up businesses. "I still keep my hand in that, so that's nice," he told me, "that

was a minor I took [in college] when I got my MBA, was entrepreneurial business and I really

like that sort of thing." Additionally, Richard's wife continued to operate a dance program at an

arts center in town, though she may be nearing retirement as well.

Despite Richard's effort to supplement his wife's income and his social security with his

earning from temp work, they had still scaled back on some of the luxuries they enjoyed while he

worked full time. When they had first moved to the area, they decided to buy two houses. One

was smaller and they kept it as a rental. The second one was a larger one that they chose to live

in. They had recently moved back into the smaller home and was selling the larger one:

> Just because we were downsizing. The other one was 6,000 square feet. That's a
> little too much for too people. When we had my two daughters and all our
> animals and friends and everything else, 6,000 square feet was great. You can just
> get away from it all. Hard to give up. But the house was just falling down, and
> we didn't have enough to take care of it, so. . .

Neither Richard's move into a smaller home, nor his statement that they could not afford

the upkeep of their former house should be taken to mean that they were struggling financially.

Rather, it signified a change in focus that he and his wife shared regarding what they want out of

this time in their lives. For them, *things* had become less important than *experiences*. Instead of

worrying about upkeep, they would rather go see a play. It was precisely within this context that

temp work had become integrated into Richard's retirement experience:

> I also usher at [the college's theater], so I get to go to all of the performances.
> Like tonight, I'm ushering for *The Caine Mutiny*. There's a play up there. And
> my wife and I will go and see the play afterwards. So that's great. It's nontaxable
> income is what it is basically. You don't, like at [the theater], you're trading
> services for being able to see. So it's not recorded as income. So that's great. It's
> just fun. Like last year, late in the season they had two that weren't on the
> schedule. One was David Copperfield. I had never seen it before, and it was just
> fabulous. Here's a guy. He's an illusionist and he came in. And I went to both
> shows. I sat in the back for the first one. Could not figure out how he did a
> number of these illusions. So I went down and sat in the front watching real
> close, and I still couldn't figure out what's going on. See I couldn't do a lot of
> these things in a town other than [here].

Through temp work, Richard and his wife had opportunities to experience culture in a way that

was affordable within the constraints of his retirement. But temp work also allowed for a

different type of experience as well. Through his work as a parking lot attendee, he was able to

meet people that he would not necessarily meet or associate with otherwise. When I asked him if

he saw himself continuing to do temp work in the future, he told me, "I'll keep doing it just because. The primary reason was not only to supplement my income but to expand my horizons, get to know different people, get to see different segments of society."

Temp work also fit into Richard's future due to the flexibility that it offered him. His current mission with his wife, in his terms, was to "get her retired." While they had done a fair amount of traveling, her work had limited how much she could. "One of the things I would like to do," he told me, "is to take her to Europe because she always claims that she gave up her trip to Europe for our wedding because she paid for our wedding." They also had friends and family spread throughout the country, and they liked to visit them as much as they can. Recently they had gone to visit one of his wife's friends in Phoenix, and the year prior they had visited cousins in Minnesota. Routinely they travel to Nebraska to visit their granddaughter as well. Temp work, especially the types of jobs Richard sought placement in, allowed him the flexibility so he could focus his retirement on these types of activities, rather than having to concentrate primarily on base economic necessities.

In this section, I have highlighted the ways in which participants had constructed their experiences as temp workers as meaningful through the use of life course narratives in which these experiences were linked to their transition into retirement. The ways that they make sense of their current work realities allows them to understand the broader realities of early and partial retirement. Temp work becomes the means through which participants can make early retirement work, without having to understand the specific economic structures that make early retirement difficult or marginalizes the contributions retirees are able to make to society. It becomes a means of dealing with forced retirement without having to understand the structures

of agism or the ways in which health and economic structures become intertwined.   Within the

narratives they create, the particular characteristics of temp work is either de-emphasized and

minimized or are as defined as part of what makes their retirement work. Patricia did not mind

working in the dog food factory, not because she enjoyed the work, but because the specific

aspects of the job did not matter. She was retired. Likewise, for all the retirees, the sporadic and

short term nature of temp work was viewed as beneficial, because it allowed them time to focus

on those activities that they did view as central to their current lives, whether it be family, travel,

or other forms of leisure.

Life Crises and the Disruption of the Life Course

While a great deal of the literature on the life course focuses on the structural dynamics

and the transition through stages of the life course, a growing amount of research has focused on

the effects of the disruption of normative life course progressions.[16] The general conclusions of

these studies are that disruptions within the life course often have detrimental effects on

individuals, family, communities, and society as a whole.[17]   As Reynolds and Turner (2008)

argue, a crisis in one's life "is characterized by instability and ambiguity with respect to one's

perceived capacity to deal with the event" (p. 225). Individuals experience something that they

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[16]The two most common forms of disruption analyzed by researchers is divorce (Hughes and Waite, 2009; Maier and Lachman, 2000; Previti and Amato, 2003) and prison (;Massoglia, 2009; Uggen and Wakefield, 2005; Western, 2006).

[17]Parents and children who go through divorce often experience interpersonal and socioeconomic troubles that have lasting impacts throughout their lives (Cherlin, et al., 1998; Previti and Amato, 2003; Ross and Mirowsky, 1999; Hughes and Waite, 2009). Incarceration not only effects the long term life chances of inmates, but also destabilizes families and entire communities, potentially for generations (Massey, 1993; Nagin, et al., 1995; Pettit and Western, 2004; Western, 2006).

can not deal with in their usual manner and even make their usual patterns of behavior impossible.

Each of the participants discussed in this section have experienced some event that has damaged their ability to continue along intended life course paths. In an attempt to recover from these events, these participants have turned to temp work. Within the life course narratives that they create, temp work has become symbolic of recovery. Just as turning to temporary employment signifies the beginning of their recovery, leaving temp work behind them signifies complete recovery. In this way, temp work comes to have a moral implication. Through it, participants who had experienced crises could view their ability to work as a judgement of worth. They were a good, worthy, and capable. On the other hand, those who either began to feel trapped in temp work or framed temp work itself as a life crisis had begun to judge themselves negatively. Their self images suffered as they questioned what it was about them that kept them from getting permanent work.

The participant that most acutely highlights this relationship between temp work and crisis recovery was actually the first worker to volunteer for this research project. David had been doing temp work for about a year at the time we talked, and had spent the two years doing low-level part/time work such as bus boy and short-order cook. Superficially, David's story appeared to be a typical one of a person down on his luck struggling to get by. Luckily David was willing to open up to me, and eventually told me of personal travails that made his story all the more tragic. For five years, he worked on a military base as a "non-appropriated fund" employee who managed an organization responsible for "moral welfare and recreation" for the military. Initially he supervised military inmates who were responsible for maintaining the

facilities. Eventually, he was promoted to managing a flight school. In talking about this job,

David remarked, " I had that job for about four years. Very proud of that. Rebuilt the program."

During this time, David also worked as a bartender at night, and this was unfortunately

where his life began to unravel. Initially, he was coy and somewhat cryptic when he told me, "I

became unhealthy with my extracurricular activities." He eventually confided in me that these

"unhealthy activities" involved using marijuana which quickly escalated to cocaine and an

addiction that would ultimately tear his life apart. He was fired from his job managing the flight

school on the grounds of "gross incompetence,"

> I was liable for what they termed 'theft by deception.' Despite being a bartender
> making 15 grand a year, and making 35 grand a year on wages, I still could not
> support my substance abuse. And what I did was I had a business credit card with
> the authority to buy what the business needed and all of a sudden I lost my
> electricity, I lost my cable, I lost my telephone. So I went ahead and used that
> credit card to reinstall those luxuries knowing. . . I'm not stupid, I knew I was
> going to get caught. I was so sick and really so deep in a mess that I just. . . Just
> get me to the end of the month then I'll deal with it. Because I knew there would
> be a comptroller reviewing my records every month and they're going to say,
> 'why is this charged to your home phone and your cable?' It was stupid, but I
> didn't care. In fact, I really truthfully was so overcome with guilt and sickness
> that I wanted formal discipline. So in a way I kind of welcomed that expectation
> and anticipation. That's what I did. A felony offense that was diverted because I
> made full restitution.

During this same period, David also had his license suspended fro driving under the

influence. The combination of not having a driver's license and having a history of substance

abuse made finding new employment difficult. When I asked him what response he was getting

from employers when he was trying to get back on his feet, he told me, "I could readily see

disinterest in any place I ever applied for." "'Can you drive? Do you have a license? Are you

able to commute?' I had to say no to all these questions" he continued, "and so that's pretty

much where the interviews ended, the rest was just formalities." It was during this time where

David was searching for meaningful employment, and still trying to make restitution, that he first

turned to a temporary employment agency.

At the temp agency, many of the same questions that had been asked by other employers

were asked again. He once again answered the questions, but was not met with the same apathy

that he perceived other employers as having;

> I was up front. I didn't go into detail. I didn't itemize what my substance abuse
> problems were. I probably would suggest generalities. You know, I had an
> alcohol problem. I had an addiction problem. But I had, honest to gosh, I had so
> much wanted to repent and redeem myself that I was able to tell them pretty much
> that I had a problem with substance abuse. That I got myself fired for felonious
> gross incompetence, but the charge was diverted. I'm making restitution and I'm
> honestly trying to turn my life around. And I was sincere and they took me
> sincerely and I was hired.

Within a week, David had taken a urinalysis test and another week later he had been placed with

a factory as a packer. What he defined as his "redemption" from his "liberal philosophy on

citizenship" had begun.

The mending that David felt he experienced through temping at the factory was both

personal and social. On a personal level, it helped him feel like a functioning, responsible adult;

> I feel like I was working my way back up because I had fallen out of grace with
> society. Temp service helped me. It is temp service. It's not career placement,
> and so they offer something between full/time employment and entry-level
> dishwashing. It's a stair step. That's exactly what it did for me. No more, no
> less. It gave me. . . I felt more responsible working on a product than I did
> working on dirty dishes. So it was an intermediate step from having fallen out
> and trying to get back to what I like to do. So it was a functional step.

At the same time, it also helped him mend some of the damaged relationships his behavior had

left in its wake. When I asked him what his family thought of him working as a temp he told me,

"They were happy for me to get work. But there was still an underlying current about the mess that I had gotten myself into. About all the good things that I lost. That was king of the prevailing, domineering energy." I asked him if he thought that the factory job was alleviating some of that tension, to which he answered affirmatively, saying, "I started showing responsibility again, across the board."

It is important to note, however, that David only saw temp work as a short-term solution to his self-induced crisis. As stated in the previous paragraph, he clearly believed that temp service was "not career placement." It was not the solution to the problems that he faced, but one step toward creating enough stability that he could move on and leave that chapter in his life behind. During part of our conversation, he ruminated on possibilities, at one point suggesting he could go back to school and become a social scientist. At another time, he thought he might try going into counseling. He even mentioned that he had looked into the process of becoming a paralegal. Following the interview, I learned that David had indeed received an associate's degree in paralegal studies and was working in a local law office. David's substance abuse differentiated him from the other participants who were also experiencing life crises. However, all of their views on temp work was very similar. All believe that temp work was a short-term response to crisis, not the solution to the crisis in and of itself. They did not use temp work as a means of finding a new career, but rather as a stop gap as they tried to get their original plans back on track or develop new plans that fit their new realities.

Several of the participants I talked to had their plans altered through physical injuries and accidents and were using temp work as a step toward recovery. Stacy had received her degree in marketing at a Big Ten university and landed a job in the corporate office of a major technologies

firm in Colorado. She was at the firm for four years, during which time she was quickly moving

up the corporate ladder. She felt as though her career was progressing nicely, and despite a short

conflict with a female vice-president, she loved her job and the people she worked with.

However, injuries that she initially believed were due to skiing resulted in a series of eleven

surgeries in three years and a nerve disorder that has severely limited her physically.

The physical trials that she was experiencing was not simply the result of skiing, but

connected to an injury she received in highschool.

> I was at this athletic camp in Missouri. And they have this rope course as if
> you're repelling. You jump and try to catch this trapeze. And if you miss, you
> fall. But then the ropes catch you and you don't fall to the ground. I caught it, but
> then my arms went back, and so I grabbed the rope so it was under my arm. So
> when it caught me, it snapped my arm back and I heard it pop. Later it all swelled
> up and I couldn't feel it. And they wouldn't take me to see the doctor; they said it
> wan't bad enough. So for the rest of the camp I had to play volleyball and
> basketball. So that was the way I injured it. And that was before my senior year,
> and I couldn't play volleyball. It was devastating. And so anyway, I had surgery
> after my senior year.

The injury she suffered was a labrum tear in her left shoulder. While it was fine while

she was attending college, it became problematic again while she was in Colorado. She went

through four more operations by a surgeon specializing in sports injuries, but he was unable to

fix the problem. After these surgeries she developed a herniated disc and had a surgery using a

cadaver bone graft. "Mine didn't take," she told me, "so I had to have another one and they had

to take the bone from my hip. See, this is what happens to me. And then I had this weird nerve

disorder. I was in pain for another year and nobody could figure out what happened. I get this

weird nerve disorder that only like eight people in the entire country have ever had." She

underwent more surgeries, including a surgery to remove a rib. "My collar bone and my rib were

stuck together from all the pressure from my shoulder," she explained, "so all the nerves that go down there were pinched so I couldn't feel my arm. I mean, it hurt, but I couldn't feel most of it."

As a result of this series of health crises, Stacy left her job and had been unable to work for the better part of four years. She came back to the area to attend an uncle's funeral and decided not to go back. She was living with her parents, and was just getting to the point where she could actually work for an extended period of time. She had recently started to take some short assignments from on of the local agencies and she was using these temp jobs as a way of building back toward working full time. Describing where she was at the moment, she told me,"it's not really fixed, but they can't really do anything about it. So it comes back off and on. And it's hard for me to sit at a desk all day and that sort of thing. And it's really hard mentally and emotionally to get over. It's [working] is starting to pick me back up again."

Stacy was finally able to starting thinking of her future again, and while she was unsure what she wanted to pursue, a number of options seemed to be unfolding for her. She was still in contact with her boss from the technologies firm, and said that he had offered her a job in Switzerland. However, she was hesitant to take the offer. "I'm not quite sure about that," she confided, "I'm just getting started again; that's too big of a jump right now." She had also been contemplating doing marketing or freelance commercial writing at home. She had some preliminary discussions with a former basketball player who runs his own local business, and was hopeful that some opportunities will develop. Non-commercial writing may also be in her future,

Well, I've written a children's book, but I just haven't finished it. An I would love to try to get that published. I have some publishing that I would like to do. So we'll see. But either way, if I could get published and publish a novel and not do freelance, that's fine. I mean, I don't know. Whatever happens happens.

With that credo in mind, she had not written off the possibility of doing temp work in the future. As she told me, "it can't come to a point where I don't do it. Unless I have a career job, I've got to do something for money." However, her eyes were on a larger, more fulfilling career than what temping offered.

Another participant who had his life altered because of an accident was "Allen." For most of our discussion, Allen spoke as though he was simply a young adult drifting from job to job trying to make a living. However, when I asked him what the things in his life were that defined himself, he replied, "racing. . . racing is my life." His passion for racing came at a steep price. Roughly a year prior, he was racing at a local track when he spun out going through a turn and was sideswiped by a competitor. "I broke my ribs," he told me, "and I couldn't race no more or I would die."

It was during his recovery from these injuries that Allen first turned to temp work. Racing never provided enough income for him, and so he had always worked on the side, mainly as a cook at a fast food restaurant. Once he was unable to race, the meager paycheck he was earning was insufficient and he began looking for another job. Crippled by his lack of a highschool diploma, he was unable to find a better job and eventually turned to a temp agency for assistance. He was placed in a janitorial position at an auditorium. After that job ended, the agency placed him at yet another fast food restaurant. Still looking for a better paying job, Allen left and began working at his current job in a small mom and pop deli.

Temp work provided Allen with a short-term solution to his current employment woes, however again he did not see it as part of his future. Though he was still unsure of what his future may hold, he had started two different plans that he hoped could eventually lead to a career occupation. The first we discussed was a potential opportunity that would allow him to get involved in racing again:

> [A racing team] is going to try to get me a job in their pit. They're going to try to get into NASCAR, and if they can do it, then yeah I'm going to pursue it. Probably next year. Next season. Before the season starts. Get to know the driver.

Allen also planned on going back to school:

> Well, it's [school] going to be sometime in June. Whenever I have the money for it. It's online. I'm doing it online. It's to get my highschool diploma. I got a paper in the mail on it. [Then after that I'm going to] college. Yeah, for culinary arts. Whenever I was in highschool, I was in a culinary arts through votech (sic). I was in culinary arts and automotive body collision repair. So I got a paper saying I finished culinary arts training up to the point that I can do certain stuff. With catering and stuff like that.

He was not sure where he wanted to go to school yet, but he said he was leaning toward a culinary arts college in Arkansas that he believed was a good program.

Yet another participant had her life dramatically altered by a car accident, though in Janelle's case it was more typical. During her senior year of high school she was riding home with a friend when they drove into a culvert and the car they were in rolled several times. "I was paralyzed for three months," she told me, "and they had me in physical therapy and I started getting feeling back because the swelling went down. They had a brace on my back to get me. . . make me sit up straight so that it would heal correctly." The injury had a lasting impact on her, as she was not supposed to lift more than thirty pounds. As the mother of a young child, she

does anyway, sometimes resulting in her damaged disc slipping out of place. Jokingly, she told

me, "so then my husband has to pop it back in. Yeah, it's not the best thing, but. . ."

While Janelle's accident was a factor in why she was currently doing temp work, temping

did not follow immediately after it. She did receive a settlement from her friend's insurance

company and did not work for a year following the accident. Even then, she enrolled in college

and took courses for a semester. It was at this point that a second life altering crisis occurred:

> [I left college] because my mother has cancer and decided that she was going to
> push that in my face when she became very ill.

Janelle begrudgingly became her mother's primary caregiver, taking her focus away from school

and ultimately causing her grades to dip to a level that caused her to lose her financial aide for

the following semester.

Unable to afford college, having much of her time devoted to taking care of her sick

mother, and still suffering from her back injury, Janelle turned to temporary employment. Her

first temp job was at a call center, an employer that she told me only hired through one of the

local agencies. She ultimately left that job because she gave birth to her son, and had since been

using a different temp agency.

> After I had my son, I went to [another temp agency] and that's what I'm doing
> right now. They had me doing a clerical thing at [a mortgage company], which is
> a really small company. And then I went to [a factory] where I was a shipping
> clerk. And then recently I was at [another factory]. I was a clipper. Basically,
> you clip items onto a clip strip, which is like you see in gas stations. That was
> what I was doing.

In short, Janelle's "career" as a temp began as a response to a growing number of life crises and

has since taken on a life of its own, eventually leading her through a series of different temp

experiences.

Like all the other participants in this chapter, Janelle did not view temp work as a long term solution. In fact, she actually viewed her experience as a temp worker stunting her long term plans. "I'd like to get training to move higher up," she told me, "I want a job that I can move up in. Become a manger possibly. Get some experience under my belt. And so far, working through the temp agency all I've got is manufacturing work under my belt, which is not very impressive on an application when you're applying to be a secretary or clerical assistant." So while temp work had been useful to her in so far that it allowed her to bring some extra income into the family while dealing with injury and family issues, she did not view it to be functional or beneficial. She desired to move away from it, even go back to college (though she could not yet afford to), and leave it behind her.

Janelle's story highlights that temp work could become a means of crisis management not just when a person was directly experiencing a personal crisis but also when a family member experiences some sort of life altering crisis. A similar situation befell Bobby and his mother. Bobby's use of temp work was not initially as a response to a crisis, but rather he used it like many of the college students discussed previously: as a means of transition. He first took on a temp job when he left school and moved to Portland. As he remarked to me while we were going through his work history, "I have so many temp jobs because it's always the first place I go to when I move to a new town or transition from school to real life, I guess." Though he did not complete his degree in engineering, he was eventually able to find work at an engineering firm in Portland (on his own, not through an agency) and worked there for three months. It was at this point that his life took an unexpected turn.

His mother lived alone and broke her arm. Afraid she would not be able to take care of

herself, Bobby decided to leave Oregon and stay with his mother while she healed. "I only

expected to be home for a year or two," He explained, "and it's going on five now." The reason

for his extended stay is that once he moved back, his mother developed kidney disease and

causing her to become even more dependent on his care. It was during her illness that Bobby

began his latest period of temping because it was a convenient source of money while he cared

for her. I asked him if it was because of the flexibility that temp jobs offered, to which he

partially agreed,

> Yeah, it's also a matter of commitment. I don't want to commit myself to a
> permanent job when my life is in such flux, you know. I think I might get a bad
> reputation or a bad reference or, you know. So doing a temp job, it's like you give
> them a week or two notice, and no one cares.

In this statement, Bobby expressed the idea that his mother's health crisis caused an

unanticipated disruption in his life course. He had not wanted to pursue permanent employment

because he did not want to be perceived as an unreliable worker should he have to miss work to

care for his mother.

In this regard, temp work was useful and even functional for Bobby as he cared for his

mother. It was his way of overcoming a significant crisis within his family. However, his views

of temp work had begun to change recently. Unfortunately, his mother did not survive her

illness, passing away several months ago. Since then, Bobby has attempted to find permanent

work. Since he did not actually complete his degree in computer engineering (he told me he was

three credits short), he had not been able to compete for positions within his chosen field.

Permanent work outside of his field was equally difficult to come by. Increasingly he felt

trapped in temp work,

> `   It's humiliating. A lot of times I didn't care because it was my stage in life. You
> know, you're a college student. Who cares? You just graduated. You can't find
> work. Who cares?you move home. You're taking care of your mother who's
> sick. Who cares?but like right now, I'm trying to get my position changed to
> contract employee instead of temporary on the roster. Because it just, yeah, after a
> while it just kind of gets a little embarrassing. It effects your self esteem. It's a
> waste of time and energy because it's not doing anything for you besides paying
> the bills.

Here Bobby speaks to the fundamental argument of this chapter. Temp work for many

participants has no internal meaning to it. It only becomes meaningful to the extent that it can be

connected to other external realities, such as college or family. If that external meaning is

stripped away, temp work is no longer viewed as something that facilitates the development of

one's life course but may become viewed as the source of crisis and disruption, as a moral

condemnation of the self. In the following section, I will discuss other participants that share a

similar outlook on temp work.

Temp Work as a Life Crisis

Up to this point, I have described the ways in which participants have made sense of their

experiences as temp workers by constructing them as useful within broader contexts of their

lives. Temp work was framed by them as being significant in allowing them to progress through

their lives in manners desirable to them. However, a few of the participants I talked to had

actually come to define temp work itself as a force within their lives that derailed the direction

that they had anticipated their lives taking. For them, relying on temp work is not a means of

recovering from crisis, but is a crisis in and of itself. While they may not be aware of the broader

structural transformations that are shaping their personal experiences, these workers are the

victims of what Bruckner and Mayer (2005) refer to as the "de-standardization of life courses"

that they associate with post-Fordism (p. 25).[18]

The workers in this section have experienced the impacts of these broad historical shifts

associated with post-Fordism in deeply personal ways. Unable to find full/time, permanent

employment, these participants turned to temporary agencies in either desperation or hopefulness

only to feel as though they had become trapped. Though they might have come to temp work

believing it could be a means of recovery, they began to view their experiences as temp workers

as indicative of the crises they found themselves in, not as a means of escaping them. In perhaps

the perfect storm in the degradation of the meaning of work, these interviewees have attached

symbolic value to the work they do. But these notions of work has taken on distinct negative

connotations. These workers have truly been set adrift. For them, work had become a source of

degradation and a moral condemnation of who they were as a worker.

Much like David in the last section provided an almost ideal example in highlighting how

some workers view temp work as an opportunity to get their lives back on track, Jude provided a

clear example of how others feel their lives have been derailed by temporary employment. Jude

began going to college straight out of high school like many others who participated in this study.

However, before finishing his degree, his wife gave birth to a baby girl and Jude chose to stop

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[18]The shift toward post-Fordist labor arrangements resulted in massive restructuring of work resulting in significant downsizing and displacement (Cappelli, 1995, Cappelli, et al., 1997; Jessop, 1992; Lomba, 2005; Vallas, 1999). Simultaneously, flexible labor arrangements such as temporary employment began growing in popularity (Gonos, 1997; Kossoudji and Dresser, 1992; Vosko, 2000).

attending college to provide for his family. Initially relying mainly on construction work, Jude

learned of an opportunity for a "computer job" through a temp agency,

> I left the unions to get a computer job through this service. It was a seven month job, I finished it in five months. I mean, the employer was completely happy with me. Within a week, the temp service had my working at another office in [a nearby town]. And worked the job for nine months whatsoever except for this one lady who was in the department that just. . . If you didn't kiss her ass she wasn't happy with you. And I've never been much of a butt smoocher, and basically I did my job, but she wasn't happy that I wasn't kissing up to her.

According to Jude, it was at this point that his life began to be negatively impacted by his

experiences as a temp worker. While at this second job, Jude took it upon himself to create a

users manual that streamlined the instructions for a geographical information systems program

that the company used. He showed it to the assistant supervisor (the same woman he had issues

with) and, as he told me, was told that it was a waste of time. The situation quickly deteriorated

from there,

> Later she goes onto my computer and takes it off my computer and saves it to her computer. Takes my name off of it and puts her name on it. When she became a supervisor within a month after that, she turns around and submits it to the bosses and says, 'look at this users manual I created.' I was not happy about that and I protested it. They didn't do anything. I complained to the temp service about it, and they said, 'well, just put up and shut up and be happy you have a job.' Went back to work the next week and the lady that had stolen my work starts a fight with two other employees and drags me into it. They called a meeting with the temp service to come out and set all of us temps straight. The temp service just basically said, 'hey, this account is more important to us than any of you guys are. . . And oh, by the way [Jude] we need to talk to you anyway.' They were not happy over the fact that I had complained. Told me at the time, 'look it's nothing personal, it's just they said they don't need your services anymore. You're re-hireable, just go ahead and check back in with us.' I checked back in with them for the next three weeks and they never had anything available. Went ahead and filed for unemployment. They fought it saying that I was fired for not performing my job duties. They lost the appeal and they were so irked that they lost that they turned around and gave me a bad reference.

It was at this point, Jude told me, that his life began to deteriorate. He went for three years without being able to find work, which he blamed on the bad reference that was being given to him by the temp agency. Initially he did not realize that he was receiving a poor reference until another temp agency told him what was occurring. During this same period of time, his wife filed for divorce and he would ultimately lose not only custody of his daughter, but also visitation rights as well. Only recently had Jude felt like his life was starting to turn around. At the time of our interview, he had been working at a call center, through another temp agency, for two months. He had also reconciled with his wife. They were living together, though they had not remarried.

Rightly or wrongly, Jude blamed much of what has happened to him on temp work as an institution. "Again we come back to the communism thing," he told me in drawing a comparison, "it sounds like it's a great thing. You need a job, apply for a temp service. But it doesn't work out the way people think it will." Instead, he felt as though his life was hijacked,

> I was like, hey cool. I'm finally in a good job. It will go somewhere once I get hired on by the company. Get some decent benefits. Start saving up some money. Buy a house. Within a year, all that came crashing down. And it wasn't just the job situation. It was the family situation. It was the court situation. It was life in general came crashing down on me all at once. But since then, I haven't had nearly as much luck or life hasn't been nearly as good as I would have hoped that it would have been.

It is not that he completely blamed temporary employment for all of his problems. Rather, he viewed it as the initial fissure that started this dark period in his life and as almost symbolic of the broader life crisis that he had experienced.

This notion of temp work as symbolic or representative of a broader life crisis was an issue that was also taken up in my discussion with Joane. Now in her late forties, Joane had

experienced a significant amount of occupational success. For several years she was an adult

education teacher and eventually became a dean at a local private college before the college

closed for financial reasons. She then was the executive director of what she described as a

nonprofit Indian center. Later she went on to work with mentally ill and developmentally

disabled offenders at a correctional facility. Most recently she has been a program analyst at a

state agency.

It was at this state agency that Joane's problems began. Due to conflicts within the office,

she decided to resign her position. As she explained to me, "it was affecting my health, and at

this point in my life my health is more important to me than money." While she did go into more

detail about what her health issues are, she asked that I keep the specifics confidential. Once she

resigned, she began looking for new work, but with little success. Tearfully, she described to me

her experiences over the past few months,

> I think I'm aging out. I don't know what it is. I feel like there are some issues
> because of my age. It's the first time I ever felt this looking for work. I mean,
> I've gone to so many interviews, and I feel like they're wanting younger. I don't
> know, it's a feeling I get. I can't even get a waitress job. It's just really frustrating
> for me because I have so many skills that I've worked hard to get. I've been an
> executive director. I've been a dean. I've been an administrator. And I can't get
> a fricking job but at a (sorry about my language), but at a temp service.

Temp work was not viewed by Joane as being the solution to the problems that she was

experiencing, but rather a stark and humiliating reminder of her struggles. It represented the

broader economic realities of an economy in recession and a sluggish to nonexistent job market.

For her, it was not a promise of opportunity, but instead a sign of the dearth of opportunities

available to her.

Like with Bobby, relying on temp work had dealt a blow to Joane's self esteem. She did

not want to identify with it. She did not want to admit to herself that this is now her reality. It

made her question how she saw herself, and how others saw her. She should not, in her mind, be

where she was,

> You know, I kind of feel like I want to say I won't be here long. You know, it's
> just temporary for me. Because a lot of them [other temp workers], they can't
> hardly read. I'm grateful for the position cause it's a job, don't get me wrong, but
> it's like, this is heaven for them. But it's not for me. It's a transition. It's in
> between. It's filling a gap. And I have to get out. Well, then I got to thinking
> maybe I won't get anything else. How can I move up quickly here at the call
> center? Cause I'm not getting anything else. But I've met a lot of nice people. I
> enjoyed the people in my [training] class. But I'm sure they're wondering why am
> I there with all this education. They've got to be wondering if I'm wondering.

In this sense, she did see her time as a temp worker as a moment of transition within her life

course. Or at least she hoped it was. To a certain extent, there was meaning in this transition to

the extent that she did make sense of her current reality by locating it within a broader context.

However, it was not *meaningful* in that she did not see it as anything other than a way to pay

bills. It was not, in her mind, a lifeline that will help save her from the crisis she is experiencing

but just another dynamic of that crisis.

Joane's story was that of the middle-class, white-collar worker facing the harsh realities

of an economic downturn. Bruce offered me a parallel story from the perspective of a working-

class, blue-collar worker facing these same economic realities and who had found himself in a

very similar position. He never went to college, but rather started working at a tool and die

company straight out of high school. He continued working there into his thirties when he was

fired as a result of some legal problems. One night he was arrested for drinking and driving and

spent the night in jail. After failing to let the company know that he would not be in for his next

shift, he was let go.

After the factory job, Bruce was able to get a construction job traveling around the

country building stores for a major retail corporation. While we were talking about how

fulfilling his work was, he actually talked about being fired as a blessing in disguise,

> Was working at the shop fulfilling? No. Well, again, it wasn't great money, but it
> paid the bills. I didn't like the work. I mean, a punch press. . . It was dependent
> on which punch press you were running and how dirty it got or how dangerous it
> might be. A couple of people that I worked with at the tool and die company lost
> their fingers. Real pretty girl lost two fingers. And actually, the brother-in-law of
> the guy who owned the place, he lost part of his hand. You know, these two
> fingers and his thumb. On the other hand, I kind of liked building the [stores].
> You know, see the finished product and I'm kind of proud of that. And again, the
> money is good too.

However, he told me that he grew wary of the constant traveling and that his girlfriend wanted

him home more often. As a result he quit his construction job and took a job as a porter at a local

nursing home. After two years, he admitted that he was fired from this job for reasons that he

was not comfortable in disclosing. It was at this point that Bruce turned to temp work.

At the time we met, Bruce was working during game days at a sports stadium. Along

with the occasional night working at one of his friend's bar, his stadium work was his main

source of income. He told me he had been looking for full/time work for several months, but had

been unsuccessful. He was actually getting ready to turn in his next wave of applications,

including one to a grocery. His factory and construction jobs were, at this point, a distant

memory. "I've gone to a lot grocery stores," he said, "I'm going to go out to [a retail chain] and

see what that's all about. But you got to do it online, and I'm not real good at that. It's kind of

frustrating."

I asked Bruce if his frustration was partially the result of just not being able to find permanent work, to which he replied, "yeah, there's a lot of frustration in that in every regard. But you know, I got to get out there and get those applications in." Like Joane, Bruce associated his reliance on temp work with his personal inability to find permanent work, and to this extent he perceived temping to be part of the crisis that he is experiencing. However, he also has a "blue-collar" approach to his current reality compared to Joane. For her, the dependency on temp work was in someway embarrassing because she felt she should be doing something better. When I asked Bruce if he felt the same, he was somewhat confused by the question,

> Oh, well, not really. In a way. I wish I had an education and could do something else, but you know, as far as demeaning? It's just work. I'm not too proud to do it is what I'm saying. I mean, I'm still looking for a permanent job.

His reliance on temp work to get by was a source of stress and frustration, and as such was an undesirable situation for him to be in. He neither viewed it as a long term solution nor as a means of finding permanent work. It was his reality, and he accepted it for what it was. But he did wish he could find permanent work so that he could leave it behind him.

For another participant, Andrew, temp work had become part of a personal crisis that was originally born not out of unemployment, but from alienated labor,

> My wife and I both lived in [a Midwestern city]. I worked in the public library system and we both had ok salaried jobs. She was working at [a community college]. She's like a data analyst, so sort of a nice little white-collar college administrative job. And at the time of leaving, I was the circulation manager, so I was manager over twenty people at the downtown branch. So sort of a mid-level management job. It was not fulfilling. You know, it paid the bills and together we lived pretty comfortably without children. But we were both unhappy with our jobs in general. So she got a job offer in California, so we decided to go for it. And I went out there sort of riding her coattails with no job prospects. But you know, I was unsatisfied with my previous job to the extent that it wasn't a big deal.

Andrew was able to get a job in a college library, but their escape to California did not result in a situation any more tenable then what they had before. His wife's new job entailed more stress and responsibility than they had anticipated and she was not receiving the type of institutional support that she want. Coupled with the declining health of her family back in the Midwest, they decided to quit their jobs once again and move back to the area.

Their move back resulted in a victory of sorts. Andrew's wife was able to get a university job where she coordinated research projects for the school. "So she landed a nice job that she actually enjoys," Andrew remarked, "I think it's the most satisfying job she's had since getting out of school with her Master's degree in sociology." His prospects for employment, however, had not been going as well.

> In the interim, when we got back, I've just been applying to mid- to entry-level positions here, and no success. Like, no interviews. I'm not sure exactly what the reason is for that other than most of them have been non-library related. So I have this career history of just library, library, library, library. So they may not think that I'm able to transfer over. But most of them have been like, administrative assistant or positions that I think are suited to my level of intelligence and experience. So I tried for four months to just go for more of what you would think of as a conventional job. And no success.

In what Andrew described as a sense of "desperation, fear, and completely dwindling savings," he went to a local temp agency after he saw an advertisement in the newspaper announcing sixty jobs paying $12/hour. When I asked him what he meant by "fear," his response made it clear we were no longer talking about concerns of alienation. "I mean, just strictly subsistence issues," he told me. "Not a fear of seeming like a gold bricker or just lounging around," he continued, "but at this point it was an issue where I had to pay for my car the following month." Temp work was the immediate reality of a basic economic crisis.

However, temp work, from Andrew's perspective, was not a reprieve from impending economic collapse. While discussing the meaning of work, he explained to me, "ideally, I would prefer it [work] to be a flow experience or something that I'm inherently interested in or driven to do. Self actualization. Flow. Experience. All those terms or words. But it's not that. I mean, that's not the reality." Instead, the impact that temp work had had on him was to motivate him "to get out of it by any means necessary." When we spoke, he was studying for the GRE in order to get a Master's degree in library science.

Furthermore, temp work did not signify crisis recovery for Andrew, but was rather a demonstration of just how desperate his situation had become. When I asked him how he felt about being a temp worker, he spoke not only of how he felt about it, but how he assumed the people around him see it:

> I would say it does indicate a certain failure among certain groups. I mean, and I think it's class based too. I don't like to think of myself in terms of class, but if I were mingling with middle-class people and professionals like university professional staff, I'm sure that's not looked highly upon, generally. And it may indicate a concern, curiosity about some kind of deficiency in that person to be in that condition. It's like a condition. I'm a temp worker.

In some since then, he does perceive the label of "temp worker" as having a stigmatizing effect. Temp work has not provided him with a means of escaping temporary economic hardship, but a stigmatized identity that was embedded in his current struggles and imposed its own frame on him, that of the failed worker.

One other participant discussed with me the role of temp work in relocating to a new area, and the resulting frustration of feeling trapped in it. Brandon was originally from the Midwest, and it was during this time that he earned his degree in anthropology and in Japanese. He went

on to graduate school, where he received a grant to study in Japan. He jumped at this chance, moving to Japan and staying even after he finished his graduate work. He worked part time as a translator, and held jobs at first an American clothing store and the at a toy store.

It was while working at the toy store that he met his wife, and the two decided to make a radical change,

> And then we [he and his wife] started talking and she sounded like she wanted to try living in America and see what it's like here. So, she's not here yet, she's coming next month. But I was supposed to come and get things set up. The problem is that the temporary service, that job ended really quickly. So I've been back a month or so and I got the temp job, and then it abruptly ended. And it's dry. Dry as a well.

Brandon initially tried to use temp work as a way of gaining short term stability, but had instead experienced the instability so often associated with flexible labor arrangements. His difficulty of finding a short-term job through temporary agencies mirrored his inability to find long term employment. When I asked him if it was just the temporary agencies that were short on available work, he told me, "Everything is. Everywhere else. I've been sending my resumes to places all over the place that I would never want to work, but I'm willing to do now."

As with Joane, Bruce, and Andrew, temp work was perceived by Brandon as being part of a broader economic crisis. Temp work was not constructed as a safety net of sorts that was a functional and meaningful way of overcoming some obstacle that had been placed in their path. Rather it was viewed as desperate attempt that they have been forced to turn to because of dire economic circumstances, and in this way was just as damaging as their struggle to find quality, permanent employment. In Brandon's case, his experiences with the current realities of the US economy has made him question the plans he and his wife have made. I asked him what he sees

in his short term future, to which he responded, "quite frankly, if things don't turn around, I'm just going to have to go back to Asia somewhere. I mean, I didn't realize how easy it was for me to find jobs there. I think maybe where I belong is back in Asia."

One final participant also discussed temp work as part of a life in crisis. However, unlike those participants that viewed it as a solution to a temporary personal crisis, or even those who saw it as part of a temporary or short-term crisis, Justin tended to discuss temp work as part of the day-to-day reality of a life in a constant, or at least cyclical, state of crisis. As he talked about his experiences, he described a history of sporadic employment in temp jobs and menial part/time permanent work interspersed with bouts of unemployment. At the time of our interview, he was currently unemployed, since in a convoluted tale of potential auto theft and repossession, he no longer has a means of transportation to get to work.

Only 21 years old, Justin estimated that he had worked between twenty and twenty-five temporary jobs, ranging from custodial work, to construction, to moving household appliances. He also discussed working at a number of fast food and chain restaurants, including repeatedly working at one particular fast food chain. After hearing of so many jobs in such a short period of time, I asked him why he left these jobs,

> Usually it's because I'm not happy for whatever reason. Well, either that or it used to be when I was younger, like outside things used to make me leave a lot. If I was stressed out about something you know. Like maybe I was in a fight with my girlfriend and I was supposed to be at work and I just couldn't let the argument go so I just didn't go to work. Or one time I quit because I wanted to go home and watch this movie that was on TV. And one time, I was working at [a restaurant], but I got overwhelmed because it was real busy. I was still at the point where I needed someone to kind of help me, and there was noone around. And all these things kept coming in, so I just got frustrated and didn't know what to do, so I just left.

In this statement, he makes it clear that he did not take work particularly seriously, and as a result he tended to cycle through jobs relatively quickly. It was within this context of instability that he located his experiences with temp work. For him, temp work was "something I do when I'm not doing so well." Or, as he was hypothesizing about why people generally take temporary jobs, "you're someone usually at the lower point in life, in a downward part of the roller coaster and you're just trying to get back up." He saw it as something that was not a one time experience, but something that he would continually fall back on as he lost permanent opportunities. He was not constructing temp work as externally meaningful as a solution to a crisis. Rather it was just another work experience, and the purpose of work was simply as he described "to get money." It was not a source of redemption. And yet his experiences with temp began to hint at something that will become more prevalent among those temp workers discussed in the next chapter: temp work was in large part a response to not just a particular life crisis, but a life in perpetual crisis.

Conclusion

The participants discussed in this chapter came to working as temps in a variety of different ways. While there was certainly an economic reality to all of there stories, not all were born out of economic hardship or desperation. College students needed to pay for their school, but college towns are generally rife with low-wage work generally sought out by college students. Likewise, the retirees I talked to wanted the extra money, but they did not need it. For some of those who had suffered some sort of life crisis, temp work played an economic role in so much that part of their recovery was becoming self-sufficient and independent again. But in stories like those of Stacy, who went through multiple surgeries to repair her shoulder and back, temp work was secondary. It played a supporting role to the broader impacts of their crisis. But

for a few of the workers, temp work was about economic desperation. The crisis they were experiencing was directly work related and money related. Joane's narrative directly ties her experiences as a temp worker to her experience as an aging baby boomer being squeezed out of an extremely tight labor market.

It is on this point that workers from this chapter share similarities to those discussed in the next chapter. It should be noted that most of the participants discussed in this chapter were white. For most of the black temp workers who participated in this study, temp work was directly and intimately tied to economic realities. Yet their stories still differed significantly from those of white participants like Joane. First, they did not experience their economic situations as temporary crises needing a short-term solution. Rather they viewed themselves as perpetually marginalized to the fringe of the economy. They also did not experience temp work simply as an individual, but as part of a community. Temp work was not just perceived as a gateway into the formal economy for themselves, it was an opportunity for their community in general and evenly more broadly, all impoverished African Americans. As such, while participants in this chapter gave very personalized life course narratives to explain their own situations, those in the following chapter gave life course narratives that was more connected to their notions of community and their identities of being black in a society still struggling with racial inequality.

Chapter 4

"Ain't No Low Work to Me": Race and the Meaning of Temp Work

Even though we as African Americans are still being treated unjustly in the justice system, we are still trying to make a difference in the education field, voting, and the occupational field; most of this we don't get credit for. This leaves me with the words of the great Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Judge me by the content of my character, and not the color of my skin."

Zoxleavon Walton III (unpublished)

The preceding passage is from an essay written by a former prison inmate who asked a question many are uncomfortable with: "Who's the victim?" While his essay is focused on issues of institutional racism within the criminal justice system, the quote highlights an issue of much broader significance. African Americans often have their presence marginalized and discredited even when they overcome the institutionalized barriers that have stood in their way. However, many struggle in achieving the initial feat of overcoming these barriers. Many blacks find themselves marginalized within the formal economy, and even when they do succeed their contributions are often trivialized. They are not judged by the quality of their character, but by the color of their skin.

In my interviews with minority participants, they typically discussed temp work as a gateway that allowed them, or other minorities in general, into the world of the formal economy. This was true even in situations where the respondent had achieved a middle-class or higher socioeconomic status. White respondents, as discussed in the previous chapter, were far more likely to frame their temporary employment as a sidestep indirectly related to some transition they are experiencing within the life course, as a means of recovering from a particular disruptions in the life course, or as a crisis in and of itself. The economic marginality and

instability that black participants either experienced personally or observed among other members of their communities demonstrated lives in perpetual crises that are deeply embedded in the structural realities and historical dynamics of racial inequality in the US. Within this context, temp work itself was seen as a direct means of upward mobility and economic stability, and therefore provided them an opportunity to prove their character. In this sense, they viewed temp work as a way to become *better* people, or at the very least, show they were *good* people.

In this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which black participants defined temp work as being *meaningful* is embedded in both the historical and contemporary realities in which many racial and ethnic minorities have been excluded and marginalized in the American economy. Contingency, and low-skilled and low-pay jobs in general, may lead to a degradation of the meaning of work, but may still be viewed as meaningful to workers by providing them with a feeling of productivity and access that they may otherwise not experience. Furthermore, I will examine the way many of these workers viewed temp work as a way to fulfill other roles, such as parent and provider, that they held dearly and that had often been difficult to perform. Despite this sense of access experienced by these participants, most have continued to be trapped in poverty and struggling to get by. I argue that the organization of temporary work and the patterns of employment associated with it has contributed to many workers' continuing economic struggles. Temp work, then, provided workers with the promise of new opportunities, but also functioned on a structural level to reproduce the very inequalities that minority temp workers were trying to escape. It provided them with opportunities to overcome the stigmatizing effect of being a minority in a racialized society, but resulted in a catch 22 where positive notions of self were coupled with the perpetuation of perpetuated economic inequality.

The Historically and Personally Experienced Marginalization of Racial Minorities

The concentration of racial-ethnic minorities in temporary work parallels the historical marginalization of minorities in the American economy. Historically, blacks have largely been excluded from nonmanual occupations and skilled trades, and forced to rely on low-skill and agricultural work that provided limited income and little chance for upward mobility (Massey and Denton, 1993; McKee Evans, 2009). Over the past century, progress toward racial equality in the American economy has been at best inconsistent due to a variety of demographic shifts, political policies, economic transformations and overtly racist social practices. From 1950 into the 1970's, racial economic inequality significantly declined (Carlson, 1992; Fossett, et al., 1986; Western, 2006).[19] Part of this progress can be traced to the effect of public policies sparked by civil rights efforts that had taken root in the 50's and lowered institutional barriers long embedded within the institutional infrastructure of US society. However, inner city poverty, incarceration, educational inequality, the decline of manufacturing, and the attack on affirmative action and other public policies by the department of justice have stagnated this progress (Carlson, 1992; Fossett, et al., 1986; Massey and Denton, 1993, Waldinger, 1996; Western, 2006; Wilson, 1999).

For most of the racial minorities that participated in this study, economic marginalization and inequality was not some historical abstraction but a lived reality, not only in their own

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[19]Part of this progress can be traced to the effect of public policies sparked by civil rights efforts that had taken root in the 50's and lowered institutional barriers long embedded within the institutional infrastructure of US society. Migration to the industrial northeast did create new opportunities for the development of growing black working and middle classes, to the extent that some researchers, such as Wilson (1999) to argue that race has become less important than social class in understanding in understanding life chances.

personal experiences but in the histories of their families and communities. Seventeen of the

twenty-one minority participants described personal job histories marked by instability and/or

holding multiple jobs simultaneously. While their experiences with temp work contributed to

this instability, they often held many low-pay "permanent" jobs as well. Yet these jobs rarely

offered lasting stability as respondents reported frequently being laid off or fired. Ten of the

respondents also described instability in their parents' or guardians' work histories as well. For

these temp workers, instability was not simply a personal experience, but an ever present reality

that shaped their lives and the lives of those around them. Unstable employment was so common

for the minority workers I spoke with that none of them experienced stable employment in both

their personal work lives and in the work lives of their parents.

For some participants, family members were generally employed, but often moved from

job-to-job in short fashion and often held multiple jobs simultaneously. John, the relatively

wealthy semi-retired corporate pilot discussed in Chapter 3, reflected back on conversations

between family members that he overheard as a boy:

> So I grew up in a family that was very hard working. They used to brag about
> how many jobs they used to have in the parties in the basement here. "How many
> jobs do you have?" "Well, I have three or four jobs and I just got another one this
> week. So now I'm up to five." And then it's, "well I got six jobs, you know."

John's father worked many odd jobs, often in construction in order to make ends meet. Unable

to afford their own home, John's mother bought a bare piece of land without his father's

knowledge, for which she was beaten. His father then built their home himself. According to

John, it was among the first homes to be owned outright by a black family in Lawrence.

Shandra, a single mother of an eight-year-old boy, also grew up in a household where her parents

had to have multiple jobs to support their family. Her mother was a manager at a laundry mat and supplemented this income working at a local hospital. Her father worked cleaning apartments and was also a truck driver.

The economic marginality that other participants experienced was not only realized through holding multiple jobs simultaneously or quickly moving from one job to the next, but also through prolonged periods of unemployment with only sporadic low-wage work. Shirley, a university worker doing temp work on the side, grew up in rural Alabama where her father worked the harvest season and spent much of the rest of the year unemployed. Aria, who comes across as the typical college student, did not have a typical upbringing. Though both of her parents had received a college education, neither were able to maintain steady work as a result of their addictions to drugs. Her father bounced from factory job to factory job, while her mother sometimes worked as a nurse. Ultimately, her parents self-destructive behavior made it impossible for them to care for her and she spent several years living with her grandmother.

The most extreme example of economic marginalization experienced by an interviewee was that of Jada. A child of incest, she was raised by a single-mother that Jada herself described as a "hustler." Her mother would ultimately be sentenced to prison after a drug conviction.   Jada met the same fate, first spending five years in a youth correctional facility and then later serving an eight-year prison sentence for check forgery and fraud. In a half-jokingly manner, she mused on the connection between her personal experiences and her family history,

> My momma went to prison. I went to prison. My brother went to prison. Now my son is in prison. You know what I'm saying? It's like a generational curse. Maybe my family was just meant to be street peoples, you know. I mean, I've been through a lot, nigger.

Black participants were not the only ones who faced personal troubles growing up. Two of the three Native Americans who participated in the study spent much of their childhoods living on either a reservation or a former reservation. Billy lived in a small town in Oklahoma that used to be part of a Seminole reservation. While the area is technically integrated, the majority of residents are still Seminole and the area itself is relatively poor. Russell grew up on a reservation in Mississippi, where his mother died when he was still young and his father was a habitually unemployed alcoholic. Both Billy and Russell would eventually leave in search of better economic opportunities. Billy had not been back to his hometown in over ten years, while Russell returned to the reservation once so that his children could meet their grandfather, but had no intention of visiting again.

The way that minority participants made sense of, or created meaning in their experiences in temp work was contextualized by these experiences of economic marginality and instability. These inequalities are structural in nature, historically embedded, and personally experienced. Minority temps did not simply experience these realities as isolated individuals, but experienced them as members of a broader community. It was not just themselves who were going through these struggles, it was their friends, their neighbors, and their families. They did not perceive their difficulties as a consequence of their immediate situations, but viewed them in historical terms, as rippling through the generations. Temp work, within this context, was viewed as an escape from economic marginality for entire communities. It was as meaningful as the *American Dream* itself. Yet, the structural realities of racial inequality and the organization of temporary employment had complex and often contradictory implications on the moral judgements of "temping."

Poverty, Segregation, and Contingency

In both academic and popular discourse, there is a trend to portray black, and to a lesser extent Native American communities as lacking the values and character to function within mainstream society. One of the most commonly discussed examples of this is research articulating the "culture of poverty." Originally it was a concept conceived by Lewis (1959) as a response to chronic unemployment and lack of upward social mobility.[20] Since his original conceptualization, the structural causality fundamental to Lewis's theory was de-emphasized and replaced with the notion that the culture of poverty itself was the reason for the perpetuation of economic inequality experienced within impoverished communities.[21]

Such sentiments that there is something about African Americans themselves that explains why they disproportionately experience poverty is routinely expressed within the media, policy, and public discourse. When describing what the average welfare recipient looks like, my students never fail to list black women, even though the number of whites who receive welfare is larger than the number of African Americans who do. Watching the local news, you are more likely to see stories of crimes committed by blacks than whites. Mainstream society has certainly passed judgement on the black community, and has defined them as morally lacking.

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[20]Lewis identified more than seventy characteristics that he associated with this subculture, including the lack of impulse control, instant gratification, and low self worth. Combined, these values and orientations, he argued, act to reproduce and legitimate existing structures of inequality.

[21]In its new form, the theory quickly fell out of favor among many sociologists who argued that it had become a politicized means of blaming the poor for the limitations of capitalism. Rather than examining the role of economic structures in creating such a culture, the culture of poverty became a means to attack the social welfare system as a political program that allowed such a culture to persist.

The above judgements articulate an important issue, though it does so through the perpetuation of stereotypes and prejudice. Ultimately, these notions are aimed at examining what the moral implications of being black are. The real question is, what are the moral impacts of economic marginality and instability? The racialization of poverty and space has clear material consequences, but its impacts go beyond purely physical hardships. It breaks people down mentally and emotionally. It effects how people see themselves and how they see the world around them (DeCarlo Santiago, et al., 2011; Kessler and Neighbors, 1986; McCleod and Owens, 2004).

It was within this broader context of cultural and economic marginalization that African-American participants located their experiences with temp work. For these participants, marginality and temping intersected in ways that offered them opportunities to construct meaning within their lives. First and foremost, temp work represented an opportunity to engage in the formal economy, and therefore a means to escape the economic circumstances that they experienced or they saw experienced by those around them.

For example, John first started doing temp work after a conversation with one of his cousins. John himself had a degree from a local university that he received during the height of the Jim Crow era. Yet he was one of the few African Americans living in his community that had been able to do so. He mentioned to me an argument he had with a cousin who claimed he could not find work,

> And he was telling me, 'oh, I can't get a job. I can't get a job.' When this came up, we had a big discussion and I said, 'yes you can, this is what you have to do. ' 'Well, I'll never get hired.' I said, 'I can get a job just like that.' So I bet him five dollars that I could have a job. Five dollars because they don't have that much money, but they took me up on the bet. 'Well,' they said, 'you've got credentials'

> 'No,' I said, 'I'm going to have a job by Monday morning.' And that's when I called [the agency], last year, and they put me in [a local sports arena] and I won my money. Cause if I bet, I'm going to win.

The type of work was not really important in their discussion. It was actually attaining gainful employment that made temp jobs such as the renovation work at the arena meaningful. Since these temp jobs were seen as an opportunity, they reinforced a certain set of pro-work values, such as the desire to be productive and "learning how to work."

One of the problems that resulted from the ways in which temporary employment was conceived as meaningful was that while work was being defined as intrinsically important, workers' expectations of what work could be were simultaneously being degraded. Many of the minority temp workers that I interviewed, especially those in the most dire economic circumstances, viewed temp work to be of the same quality or value as permanent employment. Dante was a black male in his late twenties who earned an Associate's Degree training as an electrical technician. Yet he was unable to find work in his field. When we were discussing how he compared the temp work he had done to the work he was qualified to perform, he told me,

> I know it's [the temp work] work that nobody else wants to do. It's labor that the company or the people who work for the company don't want to do, and we [temp workers] will. Ain't no low work to me. Everybody got to do something. Stuff got to be done. Somebody got to do it. . . I like going to a job, not knowing if you can ever do the job well, and going and getting the job done.

Even though Dante recognized that many considered the work he did as undesirable and short lived, he did not view himself to be "above it." In fact, he talked derisively of anyone who would be embarrassed to do such work. While he would have liked to have a job as an electrician, he accepted doing temp work.

One of the practical consequences of the declining significance of permanent work was that it lead workers to make questionable decisions which contributed to the economic marginality that they were experiencing. For example, Chuck had a permanent job as a janitor at a local nursing home. When he grew unhappy with the level of pay and the lack of raises, he went to one of the local temp agencies for placement. Once they found a job for him as a stocker at a clothing warehouse, he quit his permanent job. The overriding factor in Chuck's decision was that the temporary job paid him $4.00 an hour more than his job at the nursing home. However, the job lasted only a few weeks, and Chuck quickly found himself searching for new work. After nine months, the temp agency that had been placing him no longer provided him with additional work, and Chuck experienced one of several extended periods of unemployment. This is not to say that Chuck's economic situation was primarily because of these decisions. Rather, institutional forms of racial discrimination create barriers that make upward mobility more challenging, and his choices that privileged temporary work arrangements over more stable employment made these obstacles even more difficult to overcome.

The perception of temp work among minority participants was directly related to the stigmatization, or lack there of, of temporary employment within their communities. As described in the previous chapter, several white participants spoke of feeling embarrassed or degraded because they had to resort to temp work. Part of these negative self-evaluations was due to their perception that in our society, people who are temping are viewed as doing so because they are somehow unfit for permanent employment. Only occasionally did one of the minority participants mention fighting such feelings. For example, when I asked Jacob if temp work effected how he viewed himself, he replied, "I mean, you have to really stay strong and be

focused to really not let it chip away at your esteem or self worth." Yet by and large, minority

participants did not report such stigma existing within their communities. Mitchell told me,

> We changed, pretty much, the way people look at temp jobs. You know, they think it's drug addicts, alcoholics, things like that. Well, it ain't like that. Some guys need to work.

In some ways temp work was actually a source of status. In areas with high unemployment, it is

not surprising any job is viewed positively. While discussing how his friends and family viewed

his status as a temp worker, one interviewee, Alonzo, remarked "they can't say nothing to me,

cause at least I got a job."

Though deeply embedded in historical and structural realities, temp work is no longer

internally meaningful because of the inherent qualities of the work that is being done, but

because of the pragmatic significance of a paycheck and, to a lesser degree, the self-satisfaction

of just working and feeling productive. These temp workers' expectations had been lowered to

such a degree, either because of their own personal difficulties in gaining access to the formal

economy or the difficulties that they have witnessed among those around them, that the type,

quality, and organization of work mattered very little to them. Simply being able to be gainfully

employed became a moral victory. While such a victory may seem trivial, rarely had it raised

participants out of poverty, it was extremely significant in the lives of these temp workers.

In this way, the degradation of the internally derived meaning of work associated with

self actualization and traditional work values was replaced with alternative constructions of

meaning which relied on the intersection of work and other external realities. Some viewed temp

work as a way for them to overcome the discrimination that they experience both inside and

outside of the workplace. Others viewed it as a way to overcome what they perceived as their

own personal shortcomings, such as their lack of education, work skills, or other forms of cultural and human capital. For some, temp work represented a chance to escape the lingering stigma of a felony record. And for others, it was a chance to fulfill the familial roles of parent and provider for their children. In the following sections, I address all of these issues as themes that arose in the life course narratives created by minority participants during our interviews. As they discussed these issues, the stories they told highlighted the ways in which they attributed external meanings to their experiences as temp workers.

Discrimination and the Stigmatized Self

Not surprisingly, the minority temp workers I interviewed regaled me with stories of their personal experiences with racism and discrimination both in and out of the workplace. Despite the decline in overtly racist attitudes in the United States, forms of institutional racism and individual subconscious or covert prejudice continue to powerfully effect the daily lives of African Americans (Murji, 2007; Phillips, 201). Minority participants tended to view temporary agencies as a way to overcome racism in the workplace and as an island of refuge in which they could engage in white society without being judged primarily based on their race. When describing her frustrations, Jada told me,

> The poor, low class, they just take anything. . . We don't know how to stand up and fight for what we want. But when we did try to fight for what we want, they [whites] said we were political. They said we was Black Panthers and stuff. When we did try to stand up and fight for what we want, oh we wrong. We causing chaos. You know. So what do we do? We just settle for selling dope and killing each other. That's just how our life is in the hood. Or anywhere for our black community. We can get out of it, but when we got people stepping us down. That's all we used to. I was born in the ghetto. [Like] Alvin Brooks [a locally known civil rights activist]. . . People that you really look up to, they [whites] knock them down. But that's just life.

Many black respondents felt that using temporary agencies as mediators provided them

with opportunities they would otherwise not have had. They believed that pursuing employment

directly opened them up to the racist stereotypes and prejudice held by employers and therefore

made it more difficult to actually get hired. When I asked Tyra about what living in the area was

like after living in California, she told me,

> To me, they're really racial here [in this city]. Prejudiced. That stops a lot of
> minorities from getting decent jobs here because they're looking at your skin.
> They're not looking at your skills of what you're actually able to accomplish.
> Worked at all types of call centers and customer service, and I can't get a job. I
> just can't get a job. [Company A] totally turned me down. I did an application
> there. Passed my testing. My reading. My computer skills. Still just didn't give
> me the job. I don't know.

Alonso, her partner, later added,

> They [employers] just want the poor to stay poor. And keep the other class, the
> rich, rich. . . And don't want to let nobody go nowhere. I guess you really have to
> push and push and push to get where you got to be. Especially being a minority.
> That's how I feel. I ain't angry at nobody, but that's just how it is. And it's
> messed up. You just wonder why black people get classified: oh they don't have
> this, they don't have that. Half of the time, most of us don't even really get a
> chance. You know?

The frustration workers felt permeated their remarks, and had clearly effected the strategies they

used in seeking employment. A majority continued to seek permanent employment on their own

while also working through agencies. Several, however, had been working exclusively through

temp agencies for a significant period of time, sometimes several years.

While having to confront racism when directly applying for work was not the exclusive

reason for interviewees' reliance on temp work, it was a contributing factor. It was within the

context of racist hiring practices that temp agencies were viewed as an attractive and reasonable

alternative. One temp worker, Aria, worked in the office of one of the agencies and often tried to

speak from that perspective. When I was talking to he, she told me that she believed placement

through agencies provided a means of circumventing the racial prejudices of employers,

> I think for some people, it gives you an opportunity to work if you might not have ever gotten a chance to work because some employers are very discriminating. And if they weren't necessarily having someone being sent without their necessary foreknowledge, they can't necessarily judge that person because they're already there to do the work.

Another participant, Deborah, went even further when describing her experiences working

through temp agencies:

> When I first started going to temp agencies and I utilized them, mostly I find from a racial aspect for hiring and employment, that if I was to go in being an African American or a minority, I'll say, or a person of color, I'll say, that I would receive a less favorable response if I went in on my own as opposed to if I went in through a staffing agency. If I was sent out through a staffing agency, I was welcomed with open arms and oh they were glorified that they had a minority in the office.

Indeed, nine of the twenty-one minority participants reported that they had never

experienced what they perceived as racial discrimination either at a temp agency or at an

employer they were sent to by a temp agency. In some circumstances, workers assumed they

were entering into a situation where they would be discriminated against, yet were treated in a

way they deemed fair. Tamika was once placed as a receptionist for a group of white adjusters,

and after some initial tentativeness, found she really enjoyed the work, saying "but it was cool,

they loved me, so it was nothing."

Mitchell had a similar experience working on a restoration project. The man he was

working for had actually hired two workers (the other was a white man) and was going to choose

one to remain after the first week. Mitchell described his boss as, "country and western to the

bone," and assumed he would choose the white co-worker. Yet at the end of the week, Mitchell

was chosen to remain for the rest of the restoration. Reflecting back on his experience, he remarked, "he's nothing like what he [his employer] looks like, he's a good guy." He continued, "He chose me for my character and my skills, and not because of the skin I'm in." Again showing that respondents generally viewing temp work as a reprieve from racial discrimination.

Not all black respondents shared these views or experiences. Roseline, who did temp work at a government agency, reported being treated differently from her white co-workers:

> Yeah, you got this Caucasian girl that always went around talking to us [agency] workers. We not supposed to talk to them, but you can talk to them. But I'm a colored woman. I can't go into their office and talk to them, you know what I'm saying. I got to be told on because I'm helping somebody else that the lead worker knew where I was to help somebody else. But I get fired because I was out there helping somebody else after my work was done. Racism.

Yet these experiences were not unique to temp work. Rather it was endemic to work in general. When I asked Kevin if such discrimination was unique to temp work, he grinned slightly and replied, "as far as work experience, yeah, discrimination is everywhere you go, being black is a 24 hour job." In fact, participants generally reported racism to be far more common at permanent jobs. Shandra, who used to work as a CNA before she had moved to the area, was routinely called the "N word" and even spit on by clients. Shirley reported that at her university job she was given old equipment while new equipment was given to her white peers.

Participants also spoke of a wide array of experiences with racism in broader society, ranging from police profiling to harassment by retail workers while shopping. Jacob confided to me his personal favorite experience, "when you walk across the street and you notice the white people in the cars, you all of a sudden hear the doors locked." Chuck added, "it's not just over there [at the temp jobs], you find it on the bus stop, in the grocery store, in the gas station." Not

surprisingly, racism was a constant reality in the lives of black respondents. It is against this backdrop of constant racism that their experiences with temp work was judged. While they may occasionally have had to deal with prejudice and discrimination while temping, at least they felt that they were given a chance to prove themselves before they were judged by the color of their skin.

Overcoming the Lack of Work Skills and Cultural Capital

Another factor that influenced the positive views of temporary employment by minority interviewees was the belief that they could still be placed despite a lack of marketable skills or the cultural capital needed to succeed in job interviews. As Jada told me in reference to permanent employers, "it don't matter how you look, there ain't no certain color, if you ain't got the skills, or if you don't have the training, they look down on you." Because temp agencies would actually employ them, many of those whom I interviewed felt that they did not look down on them and were willing to give them chances that nobody else would.

Several of the participants told me they had dropped out of highschool, and very few said they had received a college degree. Roxy, for example, dropped out of school when she became pregnant with her oldest son. She had been removed from her regular school and transferred to a special school for pregnant and troubled girls. Rather than going to the school, she decided to stop attending. Another participant, Alonso, had a mother who suffered from a severe psychosis. He was raised by an aunt whom he felt never really accepted him as part of the family. As a result, he dropped out of school and ran away from home at seventeen and began living on the streets:

City to city. Anyway, just moving back and forth, man. You know what I'm saying. That's the reason I dropped out. I wasn't doing bad in school at all. I was good in school. I was going to graduate my first semester of 12th grade. But by me being unstable, I knew that I was smart enough to go in and take the GED and go in and pass and be out of academics. So that's what I did. So I could be here and be on my own, man. Cause their ain't nobody going to be out there for me. I didn't have a year and a half to wait.

Chuck, another respondent that dropped out in the 11th grade, explained why he dropped out in a way that highlighted his own perceived personal shortcomings, but also touched on some underlying social factors. "I was young," he said, "smoking marijuana, drinking wanting to hang out." "And then staying in the projects, the housing authority. It was just the life, you know. It was screwed up."

While Roxy, Alonso, Chuck and other respondents may have made poor decisions regarding their education, they were also examples of people who have been failed by an educational system in a state of crisis and a society that has failed to provide many of the basic social services needed by children living in poverty (see Kozol, 1992). Regardless of the explanations for the lack of skills, many of the participants found it difficult to compete against other, more skilled workers. Roxy, trying to explain to me why she believed she had difficulty finding work, said,

> More of the education that I need. I'm stuck with jobs like fast food. I have to do the temp service. Warehouses. Or stuff like that. There really ain't no work out here for you. . . If you don't have that college education, you know what I'm saying. I'm from the ghetto. I grew up in the hood. I know the street life.

Within her statement, you can hear her desperation, but you can also see her struggling to articulate a crucial point about poor communities: they lack the cultural capital necessary to teach their children what they need to know to excel outside of the ghetto.

Many of those who had dropped out had difficulty expressing exactly why they made the decision. On some level, they blamed themselves for making a poor decision, but they also faulted the schools and the social environment in which they were growing up. In the examples above regarding Alonso and Chuck, they took ownership of their choices, though also pointed to instability as a contributing factor. When I asked Chuck if he felt like he was just not getting anything from school, he replied, "no, back in the day. . . back at the school I was going to, it wasn't. . ." He trailed off and shrugged his shoulders. As a counterpoint to Chuck's apathy, Tyra fought back anger when discussing the failure of the school system:

> Half of the time, most of us don't even really get a chance. You know? They should have more in high school especially preparing these young children of any race. They need to start preparing these kids for testing, math testing, computers, and this and typing. And make sure that they're skilled, even if it's carpentry.

In this way, participants perceived the schools they went to as unable to connect with them in a personal way or to provide them with those basic skills necessary to function in today's economy. Many found computer technology intimidating and confusing. Also, as Tyra's quote above suggests, they felt as though they were not adequately taught basic skills in mathematics and language.

The feeling that many of the poor do not have the necessary work skills was only one aspect highlighted by participants in explaining why they had difficulty finding work. Several also pointed to the lack of cultural capital that may keep otherwise qualified workers from making a positive impression on potential employers. When I asked Alonso why he believed temp work has a positive influence on himself and others, he told me,

> From [the perspective of] a person that doesn't have experience that needs a job. You go through a temporary agency to get those jobs that they normally can't go

> up there and get for a lot of reasons. They don't have an application. They don't speak well for an interview. Don't know how to interview or what not. A lot of things. But you got people already beat down. Regardless of what they're situation is when it comes to stuff like that. They can work. Yeah, go through the temporary agencies so they can get on their feet.

To a certain extent, Alonso seemed to connect the issue of cultural capital to the lack of role models, remarking, "the only role models that I had. . . I can't really consider them role models, for real." "Just people that I hung around with on the streets who had problems similar to mine," he continued, "so it was just comfortable." As a result of "street" role models, Alonso was socialized into the informal economy, but never had anyone who could guide him into the paid economy.

Temp work was also viewed by some as a way to develop better work habits and build up a personal resume. When I was talking to Jacob, he discussed the way he was using temp work to focus on developing a better work ethic,

> That's something that I'm doing, so I'm kind of trying to prove myself. I'm taking it day by day you know. Trying to get in there. To me, it's just motivating. To find my place. To be where I need to be at. If I came in. . . I put it like this. If I came in hired on, I'd probably be more lazy than anything because I'm done hired on. You know what I'm saying. But if I get in as a temp, I can't get laid back. I got to get up there and do what I got to do.

The above paragraphs show that many minority participants viewed temp work as an opportunity for them to overcome the various limitations that they felt they had. Yet they did not necessarily view temp work as a catch-free solution to these problems. Tyra explained a situation that she had when applying for a permanent position:

> When you go interview for regular jobs. And they interviewing you. And they see these temporary agency. They see gaps in your employment. Well, I had a job. Like [this one business that I applied to]. 'It looks like you've been reclining on the couch.' Reclining on the couch? Don't you see that I've been working at

temporary agencies? 'Well, that kind of doesn't count because why didn't you keep your last job? Or why don't you have a job?' You know what I'm saying? At least I was temping.

While minority participants felt temp work could give them a chance to integrate into the paid economy, it could also become a potential hurdle that they must overcome in order to achieve permanent employment. Though many viewed temp work as a way of building up work experience and their resume, some also recognized that employers may not share their positive view of temp work.

Being a "Good Person": Overcoming Criminal Records

It was not only the lack of skills or the racial logics used by employers that created obstacles in finding work for minority participants. Some had experienced difficulties in obtaining stable employment that they attributed to having criminal records. The stigmatizing effects of a criminal record has been identified by many sociologists as being a significant factor not only when examining unemployment and poverty rates, but also criminal recidivism rates (Blau and Beller, 1992; Bushway, 1996; Spohn and Holleran, 2000; Western, 2006). Western (2006) argues that such stigmatization has a particularly damaging effect on young, impoverished black men. As a result of incarceration, African-American men experience a 12.4% drop in hourly wages and a 36.9% drop in annual income (Western, 2006, p. 119). Part of this reduction is the result of the degradation of work skills that typically occurs over extended periods of incarceration. Yet much of the economic losses experienced by black ex-convicts is tied to the social dynamics of stigma. Unable to find stable employment, many former prisoners are funneled toward the secondary labor market, which includes temporary employment, in which

they experience sporadic employment and stagnant wages (Mauer and Chesney-Lind, 2002; Mele and Miller, 2005; Western, 2006).

During our conversations, while never specifically asking the question, four of the participants in this study told me of spending time in prison. Three were African American and the fourth was Native American. None of the white participants reported criminal records. A fifth participant, a Native American, reported being dishonorably discharged from the military on drug possession charges. All five spoke of using temp work as a means of achieving employment despite most employers refusing to hire them specifically because of their criminal or military records.

After dropping out of highschool due to her first pregnancy, Jada started working odd jobs and temping to try supporting herself. After several years and two more daughters, Jada's financial situation reached a crisis point. Unable to find any work for an extended period of time, she started seeking out what she described as "alternative" sources of revenue. It was at that point that she started to, in her words, "hustle on the streets," mainly selling marijuana. Eventually, an acquaintance of hers brought her into a money scheme that involved passing bad checks. She told me she was arrested shortly thereafter and convicted on charges of forgery and fraud. According to her, she spent eight years in prison and that her children were placed in foster homes. When I asked what impacts her record had on her, she explained,

> Me making that decision to do that instead of just sticking it out. I have to deal with that for the rest of my life. When you go to some temp agencies, once they find out what you went to prison for, it's hard for them to place you in certain areas. Like, I went to prison for forgery and fraud. You cannot put me in an office where there's business material. . . I'm stuck with jobs like fast food. I have to do the temp service. Warehouses. Or stuff like that. There really ain't no work out here for you, you know what I'm saying.

Office work was not the only work that Jada had lost access to. She was certified as a nursing

assistant, but could not be hired at any of the local firms.

Because of the struggles Jada experienced trying to find work, she told me it meant little

more than a paycheck to her. While she still got excited when she was successfully placed with a

new firm, she ultimately viewed it no differently than any other means of getting money.

Because of the alienation she was experiencing, she talked as though she was beginning to be

lured back to street hustling. Initially, Jada spoke of how her "former" hustling compared to the

temp work she had been able to get,

> When I was hustling, I was making more money a day than I could working for a temp agency or any regular job, period. Working for a temp, the forty or fifty dollars you make for the little time you're there, I'd make that in less than ten minutes. And I get treated by my clientele [better] than I do the company. I mean, these are things you need to know. For real.

When I pressed her a little more on the subject, she admitted that her hustling was not completely

in her past,

> You sure you ain't the police? Well, you might say I sell a little marijuana, you know what I'm saying. If I come across a little extra. If I go buy me an ounce, I can make use of some of that and be discreet about it. Like that.

So even though Jada stated that she would prefer a "real job," the lasting stigma of her criminal

record had begun to draw her back to criminal activities to get by.

Alonzo's experience paralleled Jada's in several ways, though he seemed more

determined to not return to criminal activity. His first arrest occurred when he was seventeen and

visiting a girl at her apartment complex. Two police, who Alonzo said had mistaken him for

someone else due to his long dreadlocks, stopped him and began to search him for drugs. In fear

of the police, Alonzo tried to run away but was caught and he asserts the police beat with a

flashlight that left him with three crushed disks in his back. He said he was ultimately charged

with trespassing. Shortly thereafter, he was arrested for selling marijuana, which he said he

started because he could not work due to his back. Eventually, according to him, he would serve

nine years in a federal penitentiary. After being released from prison, he experienced a number

of difficulties:

> When I got out, I did try to pursue my college thing. Well, not college. I was trying to go to [a local vo tech school]. I wanted this type of training. But can't get no grants to me because. . . It's not even that I'm a felon. It's because the type of felon that I am that they won't give grants to. I have a drug felon. You know, a drug felon can't get nothing. I'd been better off if I had killed somebody. I would have got more help, you know what I'm saying. By me being a drug felon, I can't get no housing. Can't get no food stamps. Can't get nothing. It's like they want you to go out here and hustle. You can't even get disability, you know what I'm saying. You know, I got a disability. I got a plate in my neck. From the police.

Despite the problems Alonzo experienced because of his felony record, he was

determined to stay straight. He did, however, start hiding his felony conviction from potential

employers. He usually did inform the temporary agencies he was working through, but did not

inform the employers where he was placed. His record also effected his choices of where to

apply while searching for permanent employment. He automatically eliminated any firm that did

a substantial background check, since he viewed applying to these firms to be a waste of his time.

At the time I spoke to him, Alonzo was optimistic that after four years of doing temp work, he

was on the path to stable employment. He was placed in a temp-to-hire position at a chemical

disposal plant that he said did hire people with criminal records.

While both Jada and Alonzo struggled to find work due to their criminal records, Mitchell

had been able to avoid such problems until recently. Mitchell had spent time in prison several

times. His first sentence was for five years, followed with, as he says, "a year or two here or there." Though he did not want to discuss the specifics on the crimes he committed, he did acknowledge that he was an "enforcer" in a gang as a teen. Once he decided to stay straight, he was able to start working as a welder, first in the midwest and then through a temp agency on the east coast. After moving to the area, his criminal past began to come back to haunt him.

> Yes, my background will stop me from getting a job. Here. First time. Never anywhere else. Back in December, came in, and I was working on this project in the jail. And I went to an agency to go. And my skills and personality got me the job. My background took it from me. People aren't very forgiving. They look at your past, not at who you are or what you've done to change yourself.

Fortunately, Mitchell was able to get a job as a welder with a small firm. Though he had not been hired on as a permanent worker yet, he said he was promised by the owner that he would be after he worked six months.

Billy's experience with life after incarceration differed significantly from that of Jada, Alonzo, and Mitchell. He was convicted of felony Driving Under the Influence charges and spent two different stints in jail. Upon being released from jail the second time he found himself homeless, eventually finding shelter at the Salvation Army. When I asked him how he got back on his feet, he explained to me,

> It was actually through the Salvation Army, I guess I messed around and got drunk for about a month. It was in August of 2005. Then I got my stuff together and got that out of my system. Started working again. I did some jobs through [one of the local temp agencies]. And then through the Salvation Army I signed up for this program called. . . I forget what it's called. But I have this apartment here through the housing authority because I was certified homeless. And so as long as I'm working and pay my rent, I get a voucher from the housing authority.

Incarceration caused a clear disruption in Billy's life course as it was one of the immediate factors contributing to his homelessness. Temp work was one of the key strategies he

used to overcome this personal crisis. Yet over the past three years, Billy's life continued to

remain in turmoil, though not directly because of his criminal record.

> Just to let you know, I'll put this on record or what have you, I'm an alcoholic too, in case you haven't caught onto that yet. [I've been sober for] two months. And that's another thing I'm going through with DCCCA [a support group for recovering alcoholics] cause that's my cycle. I'll go for like two months and then blam, hit bottom then start all over again. And that's another reason why I go through temp agencies, too.

Ultimately, Billy attributed the direction of his life as the result of his abuse of alcohol. He tied

his incarceration and his unstable work history to his inability to gain control over his addiction.

The availability of temp work allowed him to get back on his feet after he faltered, though as I

will discuss later in this chapter, it also added to the instability that helped fuel his pathology.

Finally, there was Dalton. He served in the army for two and a half years, stationed in

South Korea. Prior to enlisting in the military he was a self-professed marijuana user, and after

temporarily quitting he began to smoke again. A surprise drug test led to a first positive testing,

which led to an initial reprimand. However, thinking that he would be safe from another drug

test, Dalton decided to continue using and was caught again before the week was over. He was

quickly court marshaled and dishonorably discharged.

Upon returning home, he spent several months smoking marijuana and playing video

games. Once he decided he was ready to start working again, he found that most employers were

requiring urine tests, including a garage door manufacturer that he was interested in working for.

When I asked why he initially went to a temp agency for placement, he replied,

> Just because of that DD214 [dishonorable discharge]. And plus too, when I was at school, I was still smoking weed. And there's some jobs, they pay like $13 an hour and it says they require a piss test. And that's why. I was like shoot, I need..

> . . I'm trying to save up money because there's like a [basketball] tryout in like Canada.

Dalton's stated intentions were to work short term temp jobs until after he was able to stay clean for a month, at which point he would then take a urine test to get placed at a better job. But yet he admitted he was still smoking. Much like Alonzo, Dalton credited temp work as a means of rebuilding his life. But whereas Alonzo had attempted to piece his life back together, Dalton had used temp work to allow himself to continue the behaviors that cost him his position within the military and limited his access to gainful employment.

For each of these participants, the availability of temp work was viewed as a means of coping with the stigmatizing effects of their criminal records. Dalton and Jada were both still engaged in the types of activities that led to their initial convictions. In the case of Jada, this decision was mostly based on her inability to find steady employment. Mitchell and Alonzo, on the other hand, focused on ending that chapter in their lives. The key difference between these participants appears to be the familial obligations of Alonzo and Mitchell. Alonzo was currently raising his own child and one of the children of Tyra, whom he was co-habitating with. Mitchell had no children, but is in a long-term, committed relationship with a woman he had been living with for five years. While Jada had three children, she did not have custody of them. While she said that she was currently trying to prove that she could care for them sufficiently, she was unconstrained by parental obligations. Dalton has no familial obligations and was living with his mother. The issue of family was of fundamental importance to many of the participants in this study, and was a major factor in their desire to work and the ways they constructed meaning out of their experiences with temp work.

Being a "Good Parent": Temp Work and the Family

White culture is permeated with stereotypical assumptions about poor blacks and the perceived breakdown of the African-American family. Images of lazy black "welfare mothers" and "deadbeat" fathers portray African Americans as poor parents (Jarrett, 1996; Seccombe, et al., 1998). Women in particular are the targets of negative media images of welfare-dependent single parents (Misra, et al., 2003). Theoretical arguments about the "culture of poverty" popularized by Banfield (1970) has shaped intellectual and political discourse on poverty and welfare reform, ultimately resulting in a fundamental shift in welfare policies and programs. Researchers have highlighted the ways in which welfare is increasingly used as a means of social control for minority mothers (Mink, 2001; Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001) and fathers (Curran and Abrams, 2000). Despite many poor minorities internalizing these stigmatizing labels, they never the less express a strong desire to work (Harris, 1996; Stier and Tienda, 2001) and actually do participate in the labor force (Tienda, 1990).

For many of the minority interviewees, participation in temporary labor was heavily influenced by their emphasis on familial roles, especially that of a provider. For some, this emphasis was articulated as the result of strong family values passed down to them from their own parents. For others, it was a response to the personal shortcomings of their own parents and the desire not to follow in their parents' footsteps. In the face of various social and economic barriers, temporary employment was viewed as an opportunity to successfully perform these roles of parent and provider.

Jacob and Dawn were perhaps the clearest example of this particular orientation toward temp work. They had five young children and also had Dawn's retired grandmother, Edna, living

with them. Even with Edna's social security, the family never earned more than $25,000 a year

in income. Both Jacob and Dawn have been working through temporary agencies for close to ten

years. Dawn was working with an agency that provided home-care aid to the elderly and

disabled. She had irregular hours as she filled in for regular aids who were sick or on leave.

Jacob was relying on employment at a temp agency that specialized primarily in jobs that last one

or two days at a time.

The day that we had scheduled to meet for the interview, Jacob had been called by the

agency to work on a construction site clean-up job. Upon arriving, he was told that the job was

finished and that his services were no longer required. Jacob had occasionally been able to find

employment that was supposed to be permanent, but the jobs never lasted and he continuously

found himself going back to temp work in order to support the family. His lack of a highschool

diploma made finding a regular job difficult, and he continued to hope that one of the temporary

positions he is placed in will lead to a full/time job.

For both Jacob and Dawn, temp work gained most of its meaning in relation to their roles

as parents. Both were raised in single-parent families. Dawn was raised by her mother, with

help from Edna, and generally viewed her childhood and her mother favorably. Jacob looked

back on his childhood much less fondly. His father left when he was about eight years old and he

had not talked to his father for years. When I asked if he had any regrets about his relationship

with his father, he replied:

> No, cause I guess out of that I learned that everybody does something. Even when
> you do nothing, you do something. So in my eyes, I looked at it as him doing
> nothing made me do something with my children. I mean, it's a struggle
> economically. But, I mean, if I were to leave right now this second, at least I'd
> have the satisfaction of knowing that they knew who I was. Some of the things

that I stood for. I mean, they just knew me period. And I think in the end that probably counts for a whole lot more than versus what ever it was that I could give them materially. Cause that will be broken.

Jacob took pride in his role as a father, and it was his desire to be a good father that motivated him, in his terms, "to even keep trying." When I asked him if work was important to him, he said yes and expounded on it by saying,

I'd say work allows me to fulfill the other roles that are important to me. If I'm providing for my family adequately, and doing what I should be doing by them, I get the feedback that I need to continue. Does that make any sense?

The importance of family was reaffirmed for Jacob and Dawn as their eight-year-old son, Michael, has been diagnosed with thyroid cancer. He had surgery earlier in the year, and they were able to remove part of it. However, they found out that the cancer had spread into his lungs. He was on medication, paid with Medicaid, aimed at keeping the cancer from spreading. The prognosis was not good, as Michael has increased blood flow in the tumor on his lungs, which increased the likelihood that the cancer will spread. His doctors were planning another surgery, one that they had hoped they could avoid until he had completely recovered from the first.

Because of Michael's health crisis, Dawn had been forced to adjust her own workload. While she would prefer to find a permanent position, the positions she could get did not provide the type of flexibility she needed in order to take care of Michael. Yet, the family could not afford for Dawn to stay at home full time, especially with the instability of Jacob's work. As a result, Dawn was relying on temp work. However, the jobs that she was able to get through temp services did not give any more flexibility than permanent jobs:

Those jobs, you couldn't get any time off at all. That was not good. That was not the good part. . . And some of them, you went to the job and you were like, 'no, I

cannot do this job.' Then they don't want to send you to another job. So that will mess up the flexibility, also.

The flexibility that Dawn gained from temp work was that she felt less invested in the jobs she had, and could simply call in when she needed to stay home to take care of the kids unconcerned that she would not get that job back. When she was ready to return to work, she usually had to wait for the agency to find a position for her with a new client. Her situation had just improved, as she told me that the agency she had started working through was much more accommodating than other agencies she worked through in the past.

Shirley provided another case that illustrated the importance of family for black participants as they sought meaning in their temp work experiences. Unlike most of the African-American workers that participated in this study, she did have a full/time permanent job as a supervisor in custodial services at a local college. However, she was also a single mother trying to raise her adolescent son on her own. She was able to make ends meet with her regular job, but worked as a temp during evenings and on weekends for several years in order to bring in extra income. In the past, she worked as a parking lot attendant at sporting events, but after issues with the client, the agency no longer allowed her to work the games. When we met, she was working as a sampler at local grocery stores contracted through a temp agency based in another state. When I asked her why she did temp work, Shirley told me:

> I wanted the extra money. To take my son to the movies. And I would also tell everybody I want to save up for vacation so me and my son can take vacations and stuff. . . I like working a pert-time job [on the side] because he [her son] gets some of that money, too.

For her, temp work acted as a supplement that allowed her to do extra things for her son. Her sense of being a *good* mother was not tied to the work she did through the temp agency.

However, by temping on the side, she did feel that she was a *better* mother because she can

provide more than just the basics for her son.

Many other minority participants discussed their experiences in similar ways as Jacob,

Dawn, and Shirley did. Much like Jacob and Dawn, both Tyra and Alonzo and Dante and

"Theresa" were cohabitating couples where both partners had worked through temporary

agencies to support their children. Dante explained his difficulty in meeting his familial

responsibilities and his use of temp work in very straightforward terms,

> I'm not really able to be all I want to be right now. But it's my family. I do
> whatever for them. They need me; I'm there. So that's all that's really important
> to me is take care of your people. I'm going to have to do [temp work] if I don't
> have a steady job. Just continue to do what I do. Ain't going to change.

Shandra had been separated from her husband for eight years and was taking care of her

young son by herself. She was unable to hold a full/time job because she did not want to leave

her son home alone unsupervised. For her, working temp jobs now was a way to make sure her

son did not have to in the future. Chuck, on the other hand, had eight children, though he did not

have custody of any of them. He was determined to stay employed, using temp services when he

had to, in order to pay as much child support as he could. Jada, who as discussed in the previous

section had spent eight years in prison, did not have custody over her children either, and viewed

temp work as a way to prove that she was capable of providing for her children and deserving of

regaining custody.

Each of these participants had felt the stigmatizing effects of poverty as parents. And

though they continued to struggle meeting the economic demands of parenthood, their access to

temp work provided them with what they perceived as real opportunities to provide for their

children. In some ways, temp work provided them resources, as limited as they may have been, that they could use to prove to themselves that they were good parents. With these perceived opportunities to be "good parents," and overcome workplace discrimination, educational inadequacies, and criminal records, it is not surprising that the minority workers placed such hope in temporary work arrangements. However, such positive assessments ultimately obfuscate the more negative consequences of their reliance on temporary employment.

The Perpetuation of Structural Inequalities

Despite the generally positive view that minority participants had of temporary employment, it generally did not result in upward mobility. Only two workers who relied on temporary work as their main source of income were living above the poverty line. One was Mitchell, the professional welder who up until recently had worked through the skilled-labor division of a staffing agency on the east coast. Once he moved to the area, he found that no such divisions existed at the local temporary agencies and saw his income drop substantially. The only other worker who had successfully moved out of poverty using temp work was a factory worker that had only had to switch jobs once in the last five years. Other participants that were above the poverty line included John, the wealthy businessman who did temp work as a break from his business ventures; Shirley, the janitorial supervisor who did temp work to provide extra money for her son; and Aria, a college graduate who used temp work to help pay for college.

For the rest of the participants, temp work had helped pay bills and living expenses, and in some cases provide for their children. However, this kind of underemployment contributed to a level of instability in their lives where they were a week or even a day away from a financial crisis. Many workers still required additional government assistance, whether in the form of

Medicaid, food stamps, or subsidized child care, and temp work had only moved them marginally closer to self-sufficiency. Additionally, the time participants devoted to securing temp work could take time away from their efforts to find other full/time work. Several of the agencies required workers to physically check in at the staffing office and wait to be assigned. Many respondents who used these offices found themselves waiting until as late as eleven o'clock before giving up and returning home. Even when interviewees left earlier, they were more likely to go home and spend time with their children or neighbors than they were to look for permanent work.

Many workers did not connect the instability in their lives with the instability of their work. Billy, for instance, was a recovering alcoholic who had repeatedly fallen into cycles in which he would work for a short period of time and then use his earnings to drink, often staying drunk for weeks at a time. During his last binge, he ended up homeless and staying in a community shelter. For the last fifteen years, Billy had relied primarily on temp jobs for income, and his drinking binges coincided with times that he had either been laid off or quit his assigned job. Yet he still believed that the temp work that he was currently doing was helping to stabilize his life and moving him closer to his dreams of owning his own house and starting a family. When I asked him directly if his reliance on temp work had contributed to his problems, he replied,

> I don't ever see it as a problem . . . Does it add to my addiction? No, I don't think so . . . Actually I think it helps me get back up because I might be unemployed for a little bit, and I know that I can always go to them and they have a job for me. And believe me, it feels really good to work. Other than just sitting around in your own little dungeon. So I'd say it actually helps a lot. Helps me get back into the workplace and actually just, I call it being human again. You know, it helps me feel that way again.

Doing temp work made Billy "feel human." It provided him a sense of self-worth and a sense of purpose. However, it also enabled his addiction, both in terms of providing money for him to spend on alcohol and creating work instability that gave him the opportunities to go on his drinking binges. Once he stopped drinking, he knew the agency was there to place him one more time.

Some of the other participants were well aware of the contradictions of temp work, though they may not have been able to fully articulate it. Even with the Catch 22 that was temporary employment, they saw it as the best of a number of less than ideal alternatives. As mentioned previously, John viewed temp work as an opportunity for his family members who were struggling to find work. However, when we began to talk about the economic realities of temp work, John was extremely critical,

> It's gross. Even more so. But this huge underclass working for technically under five dollars an hour. Yeah they might be getting paid 7.50, but when you get everything taken out, you're right under five dollars. So yeah. . . and then people look down on them. . . That's probably one of the sickest things about our culture. It's upside down. But the company is only looking at it as laborers. . . our humanity has become boxed into things. It only has that kind of value. Its really disgusting. So the slave system has been in existence since man has been in existence. So now we have technically a new slave system. Except you're not selling people with chains, or if they own a lot of debt. . . there's prison and making them work. So we've got a subculture. . . we see all these drones. Workers are becoming drones. And they're expendable.

John was not the only respondent who used the analogy of slavery when talking about temp work. Dante, a man of few words, added a proletarian critique of temp work, arguing, "usually what's good for big business isn't good for society, so no, it's not good." And yet these same workers were still optimistic that it was a way out of poverty and marginalization, for themselves or for the people around them.

Getting Out: An Alternative Construction of Meaning and Economic Marginality

In this chapter, I have explored the ways in which those who have been marginalized within the formal economy defined temp work as meaningful because they viewed it as a way into the system. However, three people that I interviewed (two white respondents and one black participant) viewed temp work to be significant because it helped them do the exact opposite. For these interviewees, temp work represented a means to escape the formal economy. As one participant told me:

> It started with anarchist beliefs. My big problem at the time was that we live in a society that I consider to be murdering people on a daily basis. Because if you're hungry or starving or haven't eaten in two days and you walk into a grocery store and you take something, they will have you arrested before they feed you. And what that is is that you don't have money. Well, how do you get money? You work, you know. And people say, "yeah, I like my job and yeah, I'm voluntarily working." And that's great. You're not forced to work. That's true. But to a degree, you are. Because you don't get to eat if you don't work, you know.

Whether it was the perceived moral limitations and alienating nature of capitalism, or the rigidity and depersonalization of Corporate America, these three participants found the paid economy to be unfulfilling and used temp work as a way of minimizing the amount of time that they had to be part of the paid workforce, or in the case of one participant, to become a homeless "tramp" and completely drop out of capitalist society.

The most extreme instance of this withdrawal was the case of Chris. Chris was an articulate white male in his early twenties. He came from a middle-class family; his father was a neurologist and his mother was a realtor. However, for over two years Chris was voluntarily homeless and traveling across the country. He grew up in a small town in Minnesota, where he said, "when you go to highschool in [that town], you pretty much have three options: you go to

college, you go to jail, or you join the military." He chose the first option and went to a

community college before transferring to a liberal arts college known for its creative writing

programs.

It was at this point when Chris's disillusionment began. The bourgeois culture of the

institution contributed to Chris changing his focus:

> All the creative writers do is like to talk. Like, they all are very glamorous of
> everything. It's a very romanticized way of life. And I was sort of sitting around
> thinking to myself, "you know, if everything is so great and romantic, what the
> hell are we doing here?" And I was like, they're right. There probably is a hell of
> a lot more adventure to be had then sitting around here. And like, it was a cross
> between that and the war going on.

While Chris was already feeling disenchanted with the mainstream American lifestyle, the war in

Iraq acted as a catalyst that begin a chain of events that would ultimately lead him to be a self-

described "tramp." During Parents Week, he and a group of friends printed out a flyer for each

American soldier that had died in the war (over 1,000 at that point) and distributed them

throughout campus. They then hung upside down flags out of their dorm room windows. The

college suspended Chris for "abusing his printing privileges," though he was convinced it was

actually because of the war protest. Once he was suspended, he never went back.

When I interviewed him, Chris was wandering across the country, sometimes hitchhiking,

other times train hopping. He had not reached the point where he could completely avoid

mainstream capitalist society. He did not have the skills and resources necessary to be

completely self-sufficient and therefore needed some money to survive. While he did panhandle

some, he did not like to, and still preferred to earn his money through work. As such, one of the

strategies that he used when first arriving in a new city was to go to the local temp agencies. He

found temp agencies to be a good opportunity for a quick job because they generally did not care about him being homeless:

> I've had them say to me, like, "do you have access to a shower?" Like, after they give me assignments, "you're supposed to be here at 4:30 today, do you have access to a shower?" And it's like, "uhm, no." And they're like, "ok, why don't you try to like scrub or something." It's not really my priority anyways. I don't care that much. . . Most of the time they were pretty nice to me.

At the same time, Chris felt that temp agencies showed little concern for him, and as a result he felt little obligation to them. He was fired from the last two temp jobs he held, though it was debatable who was at fault. The first was a temp job at a fast food restaurant in which he reported he was fired for getting in a fist fight with a coworker. The second was at a local elementary school where he was doing janitorial work. He told me he complained about having to do both his work and the work of his supervisor and as a result was replaced the next day. Chris did not care that he lost either job. In fact, he was more upset that he had left his jacket at the elementary school and had no way of getting it back since he had been barred from the grounds.

Chris did not rely exclusively on temp agencies for work. Rather it was one of several strategies he used. Earlier in the year, he had worked harvesting strawberries in North Carolina and planned on going to Minnesota for the beet harvest later in the year. Sometimes he picked up a some quick money under the table by cleaning at local stores and restaurants after they close for the evening. Yet all of these temporary jobs were just a gateway for what Chris hoped to be able to do in the future:

> I think my goal for this year is to find a way to quit working and start working on things I care about full time. There's lots of people I know who do that. I mean, there's this guy who runs this [artist] group. . . And they pretty much find local

> bands. And they all live in a shack on this Christmas tree farm. And they have local bands do benefit shows for them. . . And with the $800 dollars [they received from one show] they bought art supplies and sold their paintings at art galleries. And they're pretty much just doing what they want to do with their lives. And pretty much my goal for the next year is find a way how to drop out completely. I started with dropping out of college and figuring out how to get money. And now I have to figure out how to get money without panhandling and without working, too. And hopefully I can do that, and then I can just focus on writing and traveling.

In this way, Chris constructed his meaning of temp work as a way of working toward economic marginality, in stark contrast from the minority workers interviewed for this study who viewed it as an escape from such marginalization.

Chris was an extreme example in the alienating effects of the formal economy, but the use of temp work to minimize one's engagement in the formal economy can be more moderate. For example, Deborah had been doing temp work off and on for the last thirty years. Though she was African-American, she was not "trapped" in temp work. She had a college education and had many opportunities for career-type jobs, even with firms that she was contracted to through temp agencies. She was a teacher, but quit because she found the classroom "slow" and despised all the rules and regulations within the school system. For a while, she worked in a corporate office in Dallas, but found the work environment stifling. For her, temp work was part of an overall strategy in which she could live a life she considered comfortable without having to spend a large amount of time in workplaces with bureaucratic structures that she viewed as rigid and suffocating.

At the time of our interview, Deborah was making about $14,000 a year, of which about 40% was from recycling while the rest was from contract work (both through temp agencies and

through contacts she makes on her own). When she first told me about her recycling, she

remarked,

> I do recycling. There's lots and lots of money in the streets of the United States
> for recycling. And it pays particularly well, to live as you feel.

Her recycling efforts were expansive. She did basic things such as can saving, but she would

also often drive into inner-city areas and fill her car trunk full of discarded aluminum cans.

Occasionally she would take landscaping jobs and find aluminum sheeting and other recyclable

materials. Or she would make arrangements with people who were renovating their homes so

she could take copper wiring and plumbing, brass doorknobs, sterling silver, and old sinks. She

had pulled old radiators from cars, for which she could get $25 each.

It was only during periods in which recyclable materials became scarce that Deborah

went back to the temp agencies to get work. It was during these more difficult times that temp

work became meaningful:

> It provides a sense of calm. It provides structure. Reassurance that I may not
> have it today, but on Friday I can live indoors. It provides that I can keep living
> indoors. Next week I can live indoors if I work this week. The good book says,
> 'work while it's day, cause night cometh and no man can work.' And you may
> not have the opportunity again, you know.

In this way, temp work and the other jobs that Deborah did on the side acted as a safety net to

help meet the requirements of her life, which in material terms was quite minimal.

Deborah differed from Chris in that she was not looking to completely drop out of

mainstream American society. She had no fundamental ideological qualms with capitalism as an

economic system. However, she did not like the rigidity of the rules and regulations that

permeate many American workplaces and wished to minimize the amount of time she has to

spend in those situations. This reluctance interwove with her desire to focus on the more enjoyable aspects of her life, including spending time with her partner of four years, spending time in the outdoors, and writing. Her views of material possessions complemented these lifestyle choices,

> I've moved into a one-bedroom. I have two very nice, very comfortable sitting chairs in the living room. I have a card table with a nice linen tablecloth on it. And two of the fold up chairs that you put in a bag and take. And I have a small 15 inch TV on top of a file cabinet. And I did buy a new bed and two end tables. I don't care about it anymore. I can't care about it because that's not. . . It's not about that. So material does mean something to me. That I would rather have Dana Buckman than something from Wal-Mart. But if that's all that I had and it was clean, I'd be ok.

Ultimately, what Deborah seemed to be searching for was a more simple life than what she was able to find working in full/time permanent positions. By dropping out of the formal economy as much as possible, using on-the-side jobs such as temp work to make up for any shortages in income, and de-emphasizing the importance of material possessions in her life, she was able to find a sense of freedom and comfort that she felt was lacking before.

I also met another woman who did temp work as a partial escape from the work world. Janis was a college graduate with a degree in anthropology. At the time of the interview, she was working in the lunchroom of one of the local grade schools. It was actually her second stint at the school. The year prior, she had filled in temporarily for one of the lunch ladies who had hurt her leg and was unable to work. Eventually it became clear that the injured worker was not going to be able to return to work, and the school offered to bring Janis on permanently. Despite this offer being the dream situation for many of the minority workers discussed previously, Janis declined the offer, saying that she did not want to do that type of work on a regular basis.

Prior to working through temp agencies, Janis had been working full/time at the

university library. However, she decided that she did not want to be constrained within a nine-to-

five work schedule, and attempted to negotiate a part/time schedule at the library.

> I went to my boss and asked if there was any way that I could go part time at
> Watson. She told me with the bureaucracy, there weren't any part time jobs
> available at the library. And so then I decided that I just didn't want to work
> full/time anymore, and that I was going to figure out a way to live and not work
> full/time. So the first thing I did was go to [a temp agency] and sign up.

By relying on temp work as her main source of income, she was able to focus on other aspects of

her life that she found more rewarding than work. Janis was involved in art, photography,

writing, and working in a community involvement organization that focused on issues

concerning women's sexuality.

Conclusion

For nearly all of the African Americans who participated in this study, temp work

represented a gateway into the formal economy, either for themselves or for members of their

communities. As such, it was viewed as an opportunity to achieve economic stability, even as

their work lives remained unstable. The perceived promise of a stable income went beyond pure

economics though. It was also the opportunity to mend damaged selves, whether this damage

was the consequence of bad choice, institutionalized inequalities, or the stigmatizing moral

judgements made of lower-class, urban blacks.

The most clear example of this dynamic can be seen among those who viewed temp work

as an avenue toward being a better parent and in many cases be there for their children in a way

that their own parents had not. But it can also be seen in the way some viewed temp work as a

way of overcoming the debilitating effects of incarceration or dropping out of school. Even the

way in which they viewed it as a means of overcoming the racial prejudice of potential employers

ties back to the notion of the stigmatized self. The life course narratives described by minority

participants, then, not only framed temp work as a form of recovery for a life in crisis for either

themselves or those around them, but as a story of redemption within a society that even today to

often judges them as having few redeeming qualities. Unfortunately, for most of the minority

participants I talked to, up to the point of our interview, temp work also appeared to have the

effect trapping them in the economic marginality that they so desperately wanted to escape.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

When I began my journey working on this project, it was because of my interest in understanding how workers engaged in temp labor made sense of their work lives. Growing up, everyone in my family had work that was the definition of stability. Both my grandfathers and two of my uncles were farmers and my one surviving grandmother was a post master. My father had worked at the same factory since I was three years old. One of aunts had a career as a grade school teacher and the other as a nurse. Yet my own personal experience as a struggling graduate student working summers through temp agencies felt completely different. Summers became a stressful time as I was constantly concerned how I would make ends meet until my university contract began again. So the stability I associated with my family's experience provided a backdrop for the seemingly chaotic experience of temping. Out of this was born one seemingly simple question when I looked at the other temp workers around me: "how do they make sense of it all?"

This relatively simple question became far trickier than I had expected. The main theoretical assumption that the work sphere is an analytical distinct realm of experience separate from the non-work world did not provide a completely satisfying lens for addressing it. Such a conceptualization of work is embedded in a long history of the structural and organizational analysis of work. Yet in talking to temporary laborers, the ways in which they discussed their work lives were so closely integrated with their life experiences outside of work that the analytical separation of the two quickly became a hindrance. Such a conceptualization of work has allowed for a great many key insights into the social dynamics of work, and I still find it an

incredibly useful lens for understanding the world of work. However, by viewing work and non-work as a dialectical pair that ultimately inform each other in important ways, additional insights into the dynamics of work can be made that can supplement our understandings generated through the traditional analytical approach.

The conceptualization of work as an analytically distinct realm of social life can be found in the earliest endeavors in industrial sociology. Elmer (1950), while discussing what he perceived as an imminent shift toward an increased emphasis on offering industrial sociology courses, articulated the discipline as "a field of study. . . which contains all industrial relationships, each of which consists of a complex of work situations" (p. 144). He further states two modes of analysis, either studying the work world as a social institution or from the "approach of its various industrial or occupational complexes" (p. 144). The goal, then, in establishing industrial sociology as a viable subfield of sociology was to demonstrate the separation of the work world from other areas of the social world. It was to became a world unto its own.

Such an institutional approach has served the field well. Interest in technological change, work organization, managerial practices, labor markets, and employment relations all benefitted from this analytical approach. Yet in this stage of industrial sociology, the discipline tended to function itself as a managerial tool. Embedded in theoretical assumptions that often emphasized efficiency, effectiveness, and balance, work in the area often lead to understandings of labor processes that could be integrated into the functioning of the workplace in ways that increased the technical capacity of managerial regimes to exert control while streamlining production and increasing efficiency.

In response to this tendency within industrial sociology, a countermovement developed which challenged the traditional notion of the role of sociology within modern industry. Sparked by Braverman's (1974) analysis of scientific management and the deskilling of work, a new strain of theory, *labor process theory*, developed which integrated Marxian notions of exploitation and alienation into the discourse of modern industrial processes. Yet even in this new direction, the reification of work as an analytically distinct realm of study remained intact, much to our benefit. The technical issues regarding the organization of labor processes and the social relations of production dominated discourse. Decades have been spent studying and debating whether or not the dynamics of modern (and now postmodern) capitalism does effect the skill level of workers (Attewell, 1990; Sears, 1999). While I am not questioning the importance of such questions and the efforts put forth trying to achieve insight, it does close certain doors and obscure certain experiences.

That is not to say that there has not been significant work toward understanding the relationship between work and macrosocial issues external to the institution of work. Feminist and Neo-Marxian theorists have pointed to the ways in which gender structures and patriarchy shape labor processes (Cockburn, 2009; Staples and Staples, 2001). Others have focused on the ways in which economic inequalities intersect with gender inequalities (Arrighi. 2007; Mies, 1986). Researchers, including lifecourse theorists, have long examined the relationship between work and racial inequality (Massey, 1993; Schill and Wachter, 1995; Western, 2006). So a great deal of sociological research has been engaged in that does not treat work as an isolated realm independent from other segments of the social world. Yet the institutional (or work complex)

approach long embedded in the sociology of work particular conceptualization of the relationship between work and other aspects of the social world: linear and causal.

The tendency within research that focuses on the influence of work on other social phenomena or vice versa is to treat work as either an independent or dependent variable. How do limited access to work disrupt poor African American's progression through stages of the lifecourse? How do gender structures shape work dynamics? While such linear approaches to the analysis of work provide key insights, they have pushed to the fringes more dialectical approaches to issues of work.

In recent years, an increased amount of work has begun to address the blurring lines between work life and nonwork life. These studies tend to focus on the changing work dynamics caused by the increase use of work-at-home labor practices such as telecommuting (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007; Kossek and Lautsch, 2006; Thatcher and Xiumei, 2006). This integration of work into broader life experiences should act as a model for addressing work in contemporary society, and should go beyond the examination of labor practices. People do not necessarily or inherently divide their lives into work and leisure, work and family, or work and school. As I have tried to highlight in this study, work makes sense in part because of what else is going on in the individual's life, and what is going on in the individual's life makes sense partially because of their work experiences. Work is a unique part of life, but it does not occur in isolation, and the relationship that it has with other realms of experience are not linear or simple.

This dissertation is in many ways a personal starting point in examining work dialectically. It is still rudimentary in its analytical framework. However, it is in a sense dangling its foot in the proverbial water. The focus of this study is to understand life and work

as an integrated experience and not as exclusive social realms. To accomplish this task, I needed expand my analytical toolbox. Traditionally, sociologists (particularly Marxian and neo-Marxian theorists) have focused on the meaning of work as tied to self actualization or moral grounding provided by labor. These aspects of meaning I see as being *internal* to the work itself. Yet, the individuals who participated in this study routinely talked about things outside of work that shaped their perceptions of what their work means. Such alternative sources of meaning, are in this way *external* to the work itself. Yet this analytical distinction between the internal and external meaning of work does not adequately provide insight into the ways in which participants integrate work and nonwork experiences in a way that becomes meaningful. To this purpose, the notion of life course narratives provided a conceptual tool that allowed me to see the way in which participants created stories that explained how the different pieces of their lives fit together, even when these experiences were shaped by structural realities that they struggle to comprehend.

Making Sense of Worklives

A theoretical framework is only as useful as the real world insights it is able to achieve. So what are the fruits born of my theoretical shift toward integrating life and work within the realms of meaning? Have I arrived at any conclusions fundamentally different than that of more traditional theoretical orientations? A number of significant conclusions have been reached in the body of this dissertation, primarily revolving around the dynamics through which alienating work can still be constructed as meaningful to those engaged in it. One aspect of this endeavor involves the partial deconstruction of some of the assumptions regularly made about the impacts

of alienated labor, the most central of which is the notion of work becoming "just a paycheck"; a notion spoken by even a small number of participants in this study.

What does it mean to say that work is just a paycheck? It is the statement that work has nothing to offer the individual outside of the pay, implying that work is engaged in solely to fill the most basic materialistic needs. As I have argued in the previous chapters, work that lacks internal meaning is not inherently devoid of all but the most basic economic interests. That is, a paycheck can still be more than just the ability to buy things. It can be perceived as a resource in fulfilling other roles or as a gateway to less stigmatized and marginalized identities.

The integration of work and family is the most clear example of the meaningfulness of a paycheck expressed by participants. The pragmatic importance of work in the context of the family is the ability of parents to provide for the basic material needs of their children. To at least a limited extent, temp work did enhance the ability of the parents in this study to do so. However, this is not the full extent to which the parents I talked to, particular the African-American participants, connected their work to their notions of parenthood. For these parents, their work signified that they could be good parents, that they could be present in their children's live, at that they could give them the type of life experiences that they believed in the long term could make them better people and have more substantive relationships. For Shirley, temp work meant she had the resources to take her son on vacation, including trips to see their extended family down in Alabama. For Jacob, it simply meant that he was someone his children could rely on and would be there when they needed him. On the other hand, Jada saw temp work as a way to prove that she actually could be a parent and worthy of a second chance in raising her two

children that she lost custody of. Chuck viewed it as his way of having a presence within the lives of his seven children despite not maintaining a relationship with their mothers.

The relationship between temp work and parenthood was located within the broader family histories of participants. Whether it was growing up without having contact with their own fathers, being raised by negligent and often drug-addicted parents, or dealing themselves with the strains of being a single parent, temp work became a way to negotiate the structurally embedded realities of poor and working class families and a means to avoid becoming like their own parents. Two aspects are of fundamental importance here. First, temp work became *symbolically linked* to the roles, associations, and realities outside of work. Second, the way workers linked their work experiences with their lives outside of work was done in ways that either minimized the unique destabilizing characteristics of temporary employment or integrated these characteristics into their lives in a functional way, such as the ways retirees positively viewed the sporadic nature of their work.

One of the aspects of the critical view of degraded work arrangements is the notion that work is reduced to the practical issue of "earning a paycheck." But I think an important question to ask is the extent to which a paycheck is meaningless, or can it in some ways be connected to self actualization. In some ways, working for a paycheck does reduce the content of labor to its pragmatic result, namely money. However, is money strictly viewed through the lense of economics? Or can the meaning of money be constructed through a moral lense? For many of the participants in this study, their paychecks did not simply aid in their survival but symbolized a moral accomplishment. Earning a paycheck made them a *better person.* They could view themselves as a productive member of society. They could view themselves as a good parent. It

was not simply about the money, but the way that that money facilitated roles and relationships that existed outside of work and where core components of their identities. Through the moral significance of the paycheck, or the role it played in participants judging themselves as *good* or *bad*, their experiences as temp workers became symbolically linked to realities external to their labor within the paid economy.

This notion of work becoming symbolically linked to nonwork experiences is crucial in understanding how these workers constructed meaning out of temp work. It was not the actual content of their labor that mattered to them. Rather it was the way in which they connected their labor to other things that ultimately caused them to view their work as important, constructive, and meaningful. It was the way in which they connected dots, perceiving the ripple effects that one aspect of their lives had on another. Sometimes these connections were experienced as deeply personal, such as John's perception that temp work was in some ways a tool toward his salvation from a life overly consumed by materialist interests. Sometimes these connections were experienced as personal but recognized as having more transparent structural roots, such as those participants who were dealing with the realities of retirement and particularly early retirement. On other occasions, these connections were based more on collective identities, such as being African American, that were both personally and historically experienced. Temp work was constructed as meaningful not only because of the connections black participants made with their personal experiences, but with the historical experiences they ascribed to all blacks in the US. Temp work in this way became symbolically linked not only to individualistic identity structures but collective structures as well.

Participant Contradictions and Macro-Issues of Temp Work

Despite the vast majority of participants identified some way in which they found their own personal experiences with temp work meaningful, they showed a wide variety of views regarding the broader implications of temp work in American society. All of those who perceived temp work as a destructive force in their own lives also felt its increased use had a negative impact on society as a whole. Likewise, some of those who experienced it positively also believed it was an overall benefit to society as a whole. However, many of those who personally found temp work meaningful were either conflicted about or even critical of the broader trends of temporary employment.

Of the participants who were positively viewed the societal impacts of temp work, Aria may be the one most favorable toward it. Upon asking her what she thought about the increased use of temp work in recent years, she spoke of what she was told by the agency employing her,

> Well, at Express we have to watch this video to talk about. It actually talks about this. And it talks about the increase in temporaries. And they date it back to WWI, or was it WWII. When the women went into the workforce. And that was like the supposed start of the temporary industry because women went into the workforce and then they left the workforce again. So they would be temporary workers, classified as that.

This explanation of the origins of temp work highlights the way in which agencies have strategized to control the message regarding temp work and at least partially shape the discourse through which it is rendered meaningful. Factually, this explanation is correct. The first temp agencies can be tracked back to WWII. However, it is not the kind of functional fairy tale described above. We know that many of these women wanted to remain in the formal economy and maintain their economic independence only to be forced out, either by employers or family (Morelli and Tomlinson, 2008).

Some of those who tended to view temp work positively did so because they generalized their personal experiences to that of all temp workers. They viewed temp work as a personal means of escaping economic marginalization, and inferred that such an escape was one of the basic functions of temporary employment as a whole. As Alonzo told me,

> To be honest with you, my view because of where I've been, I mean, I think it's a good thing. Because, I mean, I look at it from both aspects. From a person that doesn't have experience that needs a job. You go through a temporary agency to get those jobs that they normally can't go up there and get. Getting hired on. For a lot of reasons. They don't have an application. They don't speak well for an interview. Don't know how to interview or what not. A lot of things. But you got people already beat down. Regardless of what they're situation is when it comes to stuff like that. They can work. I mean, I don't see anything wrong with it.

For Alonzo, then, the way that he constructed meaning out of his work experiences resulted in him developing notions of temp work that moved beyond the personal and informed his opinion of it as an institution.

Those who viewed macro-dynamics of temp work positively did not necessarily connect them with their own personal experiences, but rather tended to focus solely on romanticized notions of functional temporary employment. Aria herself tended to focus on the idea that temps are filling in for people on maternity leave. Alex also held the belief that temp work was a supplement to permanent work, as he remarked to me,

> For those that have the regular full/time jobs will keep those jobs. Or they'll move in and out of them as increases and decreases are made and everything. But I think that temp work is sort of a necessary thing as well to fill the gaps between things or creating jobs for certain markets that sort of come in and go real quick.

For these participants, temp work was viewed exclusively as supplement to permanent work, and not as a factor in the elimination of full/time positions.

Others did have a somewhat more cynical view of temporary employment as an institution, but never the less had no problem with how it functioned. This position was best summed up by Steve who remarked, "I'm ok with it because I'm such a capitalist. But I'm ok with it simply because it's a cutthroat world out there."

Dante went into greater detail on the point when he explained to me how he felt about temp work overall,

> I'm not going to say it's really hurting nobody, but of course as far as the jobs that you're getting, as far as benefits and pay. But that's just how they run their business. That's how they making money. You can't fault nobody for that. They not taking jobs away. It's not like they're moving jobs overseas. That's hurting. That's hurting society.

Dante's explanation demonstrates the way cynicism about temp work and its romanticization can become linked together. While he believed that the jobs provided were poor, both in terms of pay and benefits, he also held the view that these were supplementary jobs. They were not, in his view, replacing better paying, full/time opportunities.

Other participants were conflicted in how they felt about temp work as a social reality. For some, such as Billy, temp work was viewed positively to the extent that it provided a short-term opportunity but became more problematic when he considered his long-term goals. In a moment of contemplation, he asked rhetorically, "is it a foot in the door or just a revolving door?" Yet some participants were not so self aware about the contradictory views they had about temporary services. Several would begin by describing how great temp work was only to later explain how horrible the agencies treated them or vice versa. The first thing Jada told me during our interview was, "I don't like them. They're full of S H I T. They say they going to help you, but they don't really help you." Yet by the end of our interview, she seemed to have

completely turned around, commenting, "it's a good thing because they see that there ain't no

jobs out here."

Keith, the professional drummer, was another example of a participant who was aware of

his contradictory views of the effects of temp work as a business practice, and struggled to come

to terms with it. When I asked him what his views of temp work in general where, he hesitating

before answering.

> I know there definitely are things that are questionable. I mean, when you think of
> the fact that the temp agency gets paid a certain amount and then part of that is my
> pay. At temp agencies, you're usually making pretty low money. But at the same
> time, it's the trade off. Because I'm giving that up, I can leave and come back and
> I can always have work. If there weren't temp agencies, I wouldn't be able to
> leave town for a week. There would just be no way. It would be a month before I
> was able to work again, or two months. So it's good in a way. But I don't know.
> To be honest, I'm not informed enough. I don't know on the business side, what
> are all the negative aspects. I don't know.

With this statement, he hit on a point seemingly held by many but rarely articulated. For those

conflicted about temp work, there was a vague sense that there was something about it that was

potentially harmful or damaging, but they simply felt like they did not have enough information

about the actual business side of the enterprise to know for sure.

Other participants did feel informed enough to hold strong negative opinions of temp

work as a social phenomenon, even if they had constructed temp work as a positive influence in

their own lives. For example, Sam was using temp work as a way to transition back into US

society after spending a year teaching children in Asia. However, he viewed a companies use of

temp work as a shortcut to higher profits at the expense of workers,

> I have a little bit of a problem with the temp working thing in general. Just as a
> general idea that these companies only hire temp workers. They're making a lot
> of money off temp workers by not hiring a regular worker. So that's the one side

of temp work that it's a little bit difficult for me to want to do that full time. Just political reasons or what not. I think that some of these companies use it as a way to drive up their profits when it seems like sometimes they could hire a regular full/time employee in these situations where they're hiring temp workers. And so, that bothers me sometimes.

Bobby, who needed the flexibility offered by temp work while caring for his dying mother, went even further, questioning the overall impact of temporary employment on the economy. "They don't. . ." he began, trying to find the right words, "the economy doesn't function if you don't buy things. Who can afford a car and a house if they're a temp? So it's bad because people don't have the money."

Jacob went even further than Sam or Bobby in that his criticism was not simply about the economics of temp work, but rather its moral implications. "I'll say it's probably cost effective to companies," he told me, "but I'll say it's morally damaging and probably damaging to society for those jobs to be temp rather than permanent." He told me this after he had described how he felt that his own personal experience as a temp worker allowed him to be a good father to his five children.

It was the intersection between economics and morality (or ethics) that was ultimately at the center of many of the criticisms leveled against temp work by participants. The structure of temporary employment is both caused by and reinforces the desire of employers to divorce themselves of responsibility and loyalty to workers. As Ervin told me,

> The CEO's and the owners and all of them are getting richer and richer. And the reason I think they hire temps is because they don't have to pay them no benefits. . . They keep you for 89 days, just throw them away and get somebody else in there. Ain't costing them that much. So I don't agree with it. But what else are we going to do?

Joane added to this sentiment by stating,

> I think it sucks. Because the companies, they don't want to do anything for you. It's like a way of getting around having to really do stuff for the employees, you know. It's that or nothing so you better take it. But we're not going to give you anything. And we're going to keep you on as long as we can and take advantage of you. They know we're desperate. But it is a job. So we're kind of at their mercy.

For these workers, temp work demonstrates the lack of commitment to employees by employers.

Instead they feel as though employers do not care for workers at all and are solely interested in

their bottom line.

As such, the complaints of temporary employment by participants is directly tied to a

sense that it is a system centered around the hyper-exploitation of workers.

John articulated this point most clearly toward the end of our conversation:

> It's gross. Even more so. But this huge underclass working for technically under five dollars an hour. Yeah they might be getting paid 7.50, but when you get everything taken out, you're right under five dollars. And god forbid they get ill. Or hurt. They don't have insurance. That's probably one of the sickest things about our culture its upside down in. You need to keep the population healthy to be productive and if they had access to better medical facilities, you'd have a healthier work population which would be a lot more productive. They have to think, well we can make money off of this if they own the agency. But the company is only looking at it as laborers. . . our humanity has become boxed into things. It only has that kind of value. Its really disgusting. So the slave system has been in existence since man has been in existence. So now we have technically a new slave system. Except you're not selling people with chains, or if they own a lot of debt. . . there's prison and making them work. So we've got a subculture. . . we see all these drones. Workers are becoming drones. And they're expendable.

The goal of this study is not to discredit the critical analysis of contemporary labor

practices. Rather, I aim to highlight the complex issues that arise around the notion of *meaning*

when examining work. Though most of the temp workers I interviewed perceived their own

experiences as meaningful, they clearly demonstrated a great deal of ambivalence and even

cynicism about temporary employment as an institution. The temptation may be to view the life course narratives described in this dissertation as evidence of the successful balancing of the moral and pragmatic aspects of contemporary labor practices. Workers are able to still find meaning in the work they do while firms are able to achieve the flexibility they want in effectively dealing with the realities of a post-Fordist, global economy. However, such an interpretation is short sighted. That temps created such narratives to make sense out of the work they did may very well demonstrate exactly how desperately they wanted their work to be meaningful. They did not want their work to be just about a paycheck, they wanted something more. Surely such a desire signifies that contemporary labor arrangements should strive toward maintaining the intrinsic value of work even as the demands to generate profit continue to be addressed.

Future Research

Many opportunities exist to build on the research of this dissertation project. One aspect that can be further explored is the differences that exist between permanent workers and temporary employees. This dissertation is built upon a working assumption that the experiences of temporary workers are fundamentally different from their permanent counterparts. This assumption is based on a wealth of sociological research that specifically highlight the unique dynamics of work within temporary employment relations along with research analyzing issues of identity and culture within more traditional work arrangements including full/time factory work, service work, and professions.

However, the idea that people find meaning in their work lives by symbolically linking them to experiences in other aspects of their lives may not actually be a unique dynamic of

temporary employment, though the particular narratives may be. These connections to other life experiences may be critically important in temporary employment, but it is reasonable to expect that other types of workers find meaning in what they do by relating it to other life experiences as well. Before I started writing this dissertation, I recall having a conversation with one of my friends when he said that sociology is a way of life. You have to live it. He was not arguing that we have to engulf our lives with our careers, but that sociology informs how we live other parts of our lives. In his own way he was symbolically connecting work to his life in general. One potential direction for research, then, is to move away from the specific constructions that we see in temp work and examine the dialectical relationship between work and non-work in other occupational categories, including types of work that are still considered to have a great deal of intrinsic value. Only through talking with other types of workers can we completely distill which features of life course narratives are truly unique to temp work.

More work is left to be done just in terms of understanding how temp workers make sense of their lives. Through necessity, the sample of this study was created through self-selection supplemented with some snowball sampling. As a result, there are several ways in which participants do not necessarily represent the average temp worker. First, no Latinos participated in this study. Both Latino culture and the structural realities of being Latino in the US would likely have significant impacts on the way Latino temp workers find meaning in what they do and the types of narratives they develop. Furthermore, the temp workers who chose to participate in this study are likely more motivated and simply more interested in this topic than the average temp worker. Are workers who were not interested enough to participate also less interested in finding meaning in their work? Or are they more interested in just the materialistic

and pragmatic interests of a paycheck? These are important questions regarding the importance

of life course narratives of temp workers and contingent workers in general.

One final point on the potential direction of future research related to the topic of the

social construction of the meaning of temporary work shall be noted before ending this section.

In my interviews with poor blacks, the idea that temp work was not only a means out of

economic marginality but also to oversome stigmatized identities became a central theme.

Another worker, Chris, actually described how he viewed his experiences as a way to escape

capitalism, demonstrates another stigmatized identity: homelessness. During the course of my

research, I happened by chance upon a temp worker who claimed to be purposefully homeless.

During our interview, we spent as much time discussing his experiences as homeless as we did

his experiences as temp workers. During this part of our conversation, he also spoke of similar

strategies that other homeless persons he knew used to survive on the streets. Temp work was

one of the ways that he was able to avoid panhandling, which while he would do on occassion

but found it to be distasteful.

What he described in our interview was a variety of ways that he and many of the

homeless people he knew engaged in both the informal and formal economy. He reported that he

and others worked through temp agencies, worked short stints at fast food restaurants, worked

under the table doing menial tasks for local business, or worked as migrant farm hands

harvesting crops ranging from strawberries to maple syrup. Despite negative cultural notions of

the homeless that emphasize their lack of productive economic contributions to society, they are,

by this account, engaged in economic activity in at least a minimal way. The structural and

cultural dynamics of these activities are a furtive ground for further research in the meaning of

work within socially marginalized and stigmatized groups.

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