

TEMPORARY SAFETY

Contextual factors behind job quality in using
temporary agency work

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Akademisk avhandling för filosofie doktorsexamen i arbetsvetenskap vid Institutionen för sociologi och arbetsvetenskap, Göteborgs universitet, som med tillstånd av Samhällsvetenskapliga fakulteten läggs fram fredagen den 10 september 2021 kl 13.15 i sal Sappören, Sprängkullsgatan 25, Göteborg.

Pille Strauss-Raats (2021) Temporary Safety. Contextual factors behind job quality in using temporary agency work. Doctoral dissertation at the Department of Sociology and Work Science, University of Gothenburg, Box 720, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden. English and Swedish text. 232 pages. ISBN: 978-91-87876-37-0 Online: <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/69084>.

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to explore and explain how job quality in organizations using temporary agency work (TAW) is shaped by national regulatory regimes and how organizational practices and employee experiences in this context relate to patterns of workforce segmentation. The thesis also aims to contribute to the development of the PDR model of workplace health (Quinlan et al., 2001), testing it as a conceptual framework through comparative case studies in the context of TAW use.

The thesis draws on the multilevel mixed-methods comparative case study methodology. Data is collected at the two manufacturing sites of one multinational company (MNC) using TAW in contrasting EU regulatory regimes: Sweden and Poland. The MNC has the same production system, follows the same flexibility strategy and uses agency workers and user firm employees in the same jobs at both sites. As such, this data allows a unique opportunity to “control for” organizational level variables in exploring the impact of regulatory regimes. Throughout the study, qualitative data from expert interviews with employer and union representatives, documents and on-site observations is sequentially integrated with survey data at employee level.

Empirical part of the thesis relies on three studies. **Study I** investigates the role of regulatory regimes in shaping workplace level occupational health and safety (OHS) in using TAW. Results illustrate how workplace level practices that impact OHS are overwhelmingly shaped by economic pressures and suggests a hierarchical relationship between the factors of the PDR model, with economic pressures and work disorganization moderating the effect of regulatory failure. **Study II** explores social support at workplaces using TAW, contextualizing employee-level survey results in qualitative data at organizational and regulatory level. Results indicate higher perceived support for agency workers when compared to user firm employees, particularly in the context of organizational segregation and exclusion. Qualitative data allows to conclude that exclusionary practices increased agency workers’ need for support as well as reliance on informal support mechanisms and while that need was met in the user firm, there was an associated risk of insufficiency of support for regular employees. **Study III** explores the role of regulatory and organizational level contextual factors in shaping OHS outcomes in the form of work accidents and work-related exhaustion. The results show higher accident risk for TAW in both cases, but different comparative pattern for exhaustion, where higher level of exhaustion for user firm employees could be explained by segregation of TAW into organizational periphery and increased task complexity for user firm employees.

In conclusion, this thesis connects national regulatory regimes to organizational practices of TAW use, showing that job quality in general and OHS in particular are largely shaped by regulation addressing economic pressures rather than work disorganization. In capturing the complex, interconnected and contextual nature of job quality experiences in organizations using TAW, this thesis finds that the inconclusive associations between TAW and health outcomes is an inevitability and research into job quality in TAW needs to address contextual pathways and mechanisms.

Keywords: job quality, OHS, temporary agency work, employment regulation, workforce segmentation, workforce flexibility, PDR model of workplace health