

# RECOGNITION AND WORK IN THE FLEXIBLE ECONOMY

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Close to a third of workers in Australia are now employed as casuals or independent contractors (ABS, 2009a: 3).<sup>1</sup> These workers have no legal expectation of ongoing work, are excluded from paid leave entitlements, and receive only minimal protection against unfair dismissal. Moreover, the proportion of workers employed under these non-standard employment contracts has been growing steadily in recent years, with casual employment and independent contracting growing by 7.6 percent and 14.8 percent respectively between November 2008 and November 2010, compared to less than six percent growth in jobs with paid leave entitlements (ABS 2008; ABS 2009a; ABS 2010).

The shift towards employing workers via casual employment and independent contracting is celebrated for enabling businesses to ‘react quickly and efficiently to fluctuating market conditions’ (Lenz 1996:556; Aronsson, Gustafsson, and Dallner 2002: 152). At the same time, it is argued that the increasing number of workers employed under such arrangements reflects ‘workers’ preference for flexibility’ (Tsumori, 2004: 1); that these employment arrangements provide workers with ‘more freedom to choose working hours, to decide when they take their holidays, who they work for and what type of work they undertake’ (DEEWR 2005:8). Hence, these arrangements ‘not only offer businesses a way to more effectively manage their work forces [they] also afford

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1 I follow the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ (ABS) definitions of casual employment and independent contracting in this article. According to the ABS, independent contractors are workers ‘who operate their own business and who contract to perform services for others without having the legal status of an employee’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009c, p. 19). Casual employees, as the ABS defines them, are employees without paid leave entitlements (ABS 2009b).

employees flexibility [and] independence' (Lenz 1996:556, 558). These claims are hotly contested by critics, who worry that the lack of job security means that workers 'now bear the burden of organizational and economic performance as never before' (Scott 2004: 145). The ease with which employees can be dismissed, for example, puts pressure on workers to come to work sick, to avoid taking time off, and even to take on more hazardous jobs for fear of losing shifts or future employment contracts should they refuse (Facey and Eakin, 2010: 335).

These are important criticisms that go to the heart of the issue of whether casual employment and independent contracting gives workers more or less freedom and control over their work. However, in this article, I develop an alternative line of criticism that focuses on what these changes to the social organisation of work mean for the role of work as a vehicle the development of subjectivity. Subjectivity is the consciousness of ourselves as self-efficacious agents capable of shaping the world around us. Work can play an important role in the development of this subjectivity because it involves both our social and practical agency (Dejours 2006: 56) and it is through practical and social self-realisation (or recognition) that we come to firmly grasp our identity as agents who not only live the world but who also are capable of shaping it. This is a profoundly Hegelian idea, and the argument developed in this article owes much to Hegel's philosophy of recognition; in particular, to his discussion of the relationship between work and recognition.

I argue that the changes in the social organisation of work being wrought by casual employment and, to a lesser extent, independent contracting, threaten work as a vehicle for the development of subjectivity because these forms of employment erode workers' opportunities to experience practical and social recognition of their identity as persons capable of shaping the world around them. In making this argument, I draw on the experiences of 47 casual employees and 11 independent contractors who were interviewed in late 2009 as part of a larger study on insecure work and its effects on worker's health and wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> A brief description of the profile of these workers is included below.

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2 For details of this larger study see (McGann *et al.* 2012)

**Table 1: Characteristics of Research Participants**

	<b>Casual</b>	<b>Independent Contractors</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
<i>Male</i>	55%	91%
<i>Female</i>	45%	9%
<b>Age</b>		
<i>Under 20</i>	4%	-
<i>20-30</i>	26%	-
<i>30-40</i>	17%	27%
<i>40-50</i>	28%	55%
<i>50-60</i>	21%	9%
<i>Over 60</i>	2%	9%
<b>Family Circumstance</b>		
<i>Lives with Partner</i>	53%	82%
<i>Has Dependents</i>	40%	55%
<b>Weekly Household Income</b>		
<i>&lt;\$500</i>	24%	-
<i>\$501 - \$1000</i>	32%	27%
<i>\$1001 - \$1800</i>	23%	46%
<i>&gt;\$1800</i>	13%	18%
<i>Not Reported</i>	9%	9%
<b>Education</b>		
<i>Some primary</i>	2%	-
<i>Finished primary</i>	2%	-
<i>Some secondary</i>	26%	18%
<i>Finished secondary</i>	11%	-
<i>Skilled vocational course</i>	23%	73%
<i>Assoc dip</i>	9%	9%
<i>Undergrad dip</i>	2%	-
<i>Bachelors</i>	11%	-
<i>Postgraduate Degree</i>	2%	-
<i>Unknown</i>	13%	-

## Research Method

The majority of those interviewed—including casuals—were men. The proportion of men included in this study is higher than their share of casual employment nationally, as indicated by ABS statistics. This atypical gender pattern is explained by the particular focus of the larger study on the experiences of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery workers (industries historically dominated by men). More consistent with national ABS data, those in casual employment were generally younger and less well educated than independent contractors, and they also worked in less skilled and more poorly paid jobs: they were also less likely to live with a partner or to have dependents.

The interviews took place at locations in regional and rural Victoria in and around East Gippsland, Mildura, Shepparton, Ballarat, Bendigo, Leongatha and Hastings. These locations were chosen on the basis that industries in the area had a high concentration of workers employed as casuals or as independent contractors. Union and employee organisations assisted with recruiting participants for the study, and advertisements were also placed in local newspapers. The interviews were semi-structured, each lasting 40 minutes on average. All interviews were taped and transcribed, and a copy of the transcript was sent to interviewees for verification. The names and other identifying characteristics of interviewees have been removed to safeguard their identity.

## Work the Development of Subjectivity

The criticism of casual employment and independent contracting developed in this article draws heavily from Hegel's philosophy of recognition. Hegel held that 'reason [or subjectivity]<sup>3</sup> can exist only in its work' (Hegel 1932:233, cited in Avineri 1971:103). This is to say that it is only through purposively intervening in the world and shaping it that people can come to firmly grasp (or 'see') themselves as agents capable of shaping the world around them. Prior to this, their understanding of themselves as autonomous agents is precarious in the sense that it remains at the level of an idea that has yet to become concrete.

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3 For Hegel, reason, freedom and subjectivity are interchangeable terms.

**Table 2: Industry and Occupation of Research Participants**

	<b>Casuals</b>	<b>Independent Contractors</b>
<b>Industry</b>		
<i>Agriculture/Fishing</i>	49%	46%
<i>Manufacturing &amp; Food Prod.</i>	11%	-
<i>Construction</i>	4%	36%
<i>Transport &amp; Storage</i>	15%	-
<i>Telecommunications</i>	-	9%
<i>Education</i>	6%	-
<i>Finance &amp; Insurance</i>	-	9%
<i>Property and Business services</i>	2%	-
<i>Health &amp; Community services</i>	6%	-
<i>Cultural &amp; recreational services</i>	2%	-
<i>Works in Multiple industries</i>	4%	-
<b>Occupation</b>		
<i>Labourer</i>	49%	-
<i>Inter. prod/transport workers</i>	17%	-
<i>Elem. clerical, sales, service workers</i>	6%	-
<i>Inter. clerical, sales, service workers</i>	6%	-
<i>Adv. clerical, sales, service worker</i>	2%	-
<i>Tradesperson &amp; related worker</i>	-	64%
<i>Associate professional</i>	11%	18%
<i>Professional</i>	9%	-
<i>Managers &amp; administrator</i>	-	18%

Only when subjectivity is demonstrated concretely does it become ‘true’ for Hegel. Seeing our consciousness reflected in the physical work that we do is one way that our subjectivity can be demonstrated concretely (practical self-realisation). Having our subjectivity actively acknowledged and confirmed by others through the recognition they

afford is another (social self-realisation). This is what Hegel means when he says that 'it is everyone's purpose to perceive himself in the other' (Hegel 1967:210, cited in Avineri 1971:99).

Commenting on the importance of practical activity to the development of subjectivity, Hegel argues that 'man brings himself before himself by practical activity' (Hegel 1975:31). What Hegel means by this is best illustrated by his discussion in his famous Master-Slave Dialectic of the role that work plays in the development of the consciousness of the slave.

According to Hegel, it is in carrying out the work of the master that the slave 'becomes conscious of what he truly is' (Hegel 1977:195). Through working on the material world and transforming it, the slave's 'own negativity, his being-for-self, becomes an object for him' and so 'he acquires a mind of his own' (Hegel 1977:196).<sup>4</sup> The work of the slave contributes to the development of his subjectivity because he 'sees in the world of objects made by him the reflection of himself...as a thinking being' (Taylor 1975:157). In seeing the transformative effects of his labour on the world, the slave comes to understand that his thoughts and ideas are not merely abstractions but are the product of a concrete will with a power of its own.

Importantly, for Hegel, physical labour is not the only form of practical activity that can perform this role. Elsewhere, in his work on aesthetics, Hegel famously celebrates the role that the creation of a work of art can play in enabling individuals to experience their subjectivity concretely in the world. More recently, Jon Elster has argued that success in the exercise of central life projects, such as raising children or gaining qualifications, can similarly foster a practical realisation of self inasmuch as these projects enable individuals to see the fruits of their subjectivity concretely expressed (Elster 1986:99). The important point is that it is through intentionally (and successfully) carrying out projects and seeing the material results of our subjectivity reflected in experience that we can come to a greater certainty of ourselves as autonomous agents.

But for work and other forms of practical activity to facilitate practical self-realisation, they must be meaningful in the sense that the agent must be able to see some element of his or her consciousness in the activity

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4 Marx would later make much the same point, arguing that by 'acting on the external world and changing it...[man] at the same time changes his own nature. He develops the potentialities that slumber within him' (Marx 1930:169).

that is performed. As Nick Smith argues, 'if workers cannot perform acts of work...without exercising their practical intelligence in shaping and prosecuting the task at hand, or without being able to connect meaningfully with the objects that give their work its point, their subjectivity lacks affirmation or recognition' (Smith 2009:52-53). This was something of which Hegel was acutely aware.

Hegel was familiar with Adam Smith's famous description of the detailed division of labour in pin-making in England, where '[o]ne man draws out the wire, another straightens it, a third cuts it, a fourth points it' (1976:1:8). Work under such conditions, Hegel argued, becomes 'absolutely more and more dead' (machine-like) to the point that 'the consciousness of the factory worker is degraded to the utmost level of dullness' (Hegel 1932:197-198, cited in Avineri 1971:105).

This is confirmed by 20<sup>th</sup> century sociological studies of the effects of factory work on workers' personalities and cognitive development. For example, studies of factory work in America carried out in the 60s and 70s by Komhauser, Kohn and Schooler (Kohn and Schooler 1978; Komhauser 1964) show a reciprocal relationship 'between the degree to which work in its very substance demands thought and independent judgement and the degree to which persons are flexible in coping with the intellectual demands of complex situations' (Schwartz 1982:637, 638). Indeed, over a ten year period, Kohn and Schooler found that 'the cognitive capacities of men with complex jobs developed through work whereas the capacities of men with simple and repetitive jobs deteriorated' (Kohn and Schooler 1983:304). Moreover, the effects of routine work on individuals' agency tended to spill over into other spheres of their life, with mindless work leading to mindless leisure (Murphy 1993:4; Kohn and Schooler 1983: 239-40).

Epidemiological research over the past 30 years goes even further to suggest that the detailed division of labour can also be highly destructive of workers' health. This was famously illustrated in the Whitehall studies, which showed a stepwise relationship between employment grade and health amongst British civil servants that had largely to do with the different levels of control—measured in terms of decision latitude and skill discretion—that employees had over their work

(Marmot *et al.* 1997:235).<sup>5</sup> In countless international studies since, low control by workers over their work has been shown to be associated with increased risk of cardiovascular illness, poorer self-related health, and depression (Bosma *et al.* 1997:314; Benach, Muntaner, and Santana 2007:81).

The link between control over work and health is said to operate via the effect that the exercise of control over work has on individuals' experience of self-efficacy. As Karasek (1979:303) argues, the exercise of control over work contributes positively to health because it 'represents an opportunity to exercise judgement' and so 'enhances the individual's feelings of efficacy and ability to cope with the environment.' This may explain why it is the element of mental challenge that is most frequently identified by workers as being the aspect of work that contributes most of all to job satisfaction (Elster 1986:113). As a building subcontractor in East Gippsland explained:

we seem to attract all these sort of the upmarket houses with all the curves and the bends, the roofs and stuff like that. But *it's a challenge*, everything's a challenge and there's a lot of steel in it, so *it's a lot of thinking*, you've got [to] set it all out. *So it's a lot better than just walking onto a slab that's already been done and just stand up a frame that's been made in Melbourne, go to the next one.* I couldn't see what satisfaction that gives me (HFW039, my emphasis).

This worker's experience of building sub-contracting was unique among the construction workers interviewed. He was fortunate that he worked for a private builder erecting architecturally designed homes. The other building sub-contractors who participated in the study—mainly carpenters and plasterers sub-contracting for large residential builders—had an altogether different experience of independent contracting. The builders they worked for paid poorly and the work was boring and repetitive. For example, a carpenter explained that the work he now does 'is more like production line building; it is just whack them up quick and

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5 Middle-aged men at the bottom of the British civil service were at four times the risk of mortality as middle-aged administrators at the top of the hierarchy, while each employment grade in the civil service had a higher mortality rate than the grade above it, even when traditional risk factors such as smoking, diet, blood pressure, plasma cholesterol, short height and blood sugar were controlled for (Marmot 2004:39).

getting onto the next one straightaway.’ Before, when he was working with smaller builders, ‘it was more involved with the whole house...you’re there from start to finish, you weren’t on five different houses at the same time’ (HFW046).

The fact that this carpenter now finds his work more repetitive and routine may have little to do with him now being an independent contractor. The relationship between a person’s work and the opportunities that it affords to experience practical self-realisation is a matter of the *type* of work that is performed rather than the sort of employment arrangement under which the work is performed. And whether a person is employed on a permanent or non-standard employment contract may make little difference to the type of work that they perform—at least in the short term.

In the long term, however, whether someone is employed on casual or ongoing basis may matter hugely to the type of work that they get to perform. This is because of the effect that working as an independent contractor or casual employee—rather than a permanent employee—has on their opportunities for professional development and skills training.

As Aronsson, Gustafsson and Dallner point out, access to skills training and professional development are important in enabling workers to take control over their careers, as these resources ‘increase the employability of the individual’ and determine ‘whether the individual is heading towards greater control over his/her work-life situation and less uncertainty within the employing organisation and on the labour market’ (Aronsson *et al.* 2002: 172). However, studies indicate that non-standard workers in general, and casual employees in particular, have fewer opportunities to participate in skills training and professional development than permanent, ongoing employees. For example, a 2002 OECD report reports that temporary workers in Europe receive considerably less employer-provided training than their permanent counterparts (OECD 2002: 156 in Economic Development Committee 2005:116). An Australian study of employee training conducted in 2000 similarly found that, while almost 70 percent of permanent employees had undergone some form of professional development over the past year, only 50 percent of casual employees had participated in professional development (Watson *et al.* 2003 cited in Economic Development Committee 2005:123). A more recent study suggests that the gap in employer-provided training is widening, both in terms of the

amount of training received and the quality of the content, and that it is the casual contract itself rather than working fewer hours that predicts poorer training (Richardson and Liu 2006:27-8).

Those interviewed repeatedly reported missing out on professional development and training opportunities. As a casual dockworker explained, 'they'll train all the permanents and PGEs [permanent part-time workers] first and then, if there's room or so, they'll train the casuals. But most of the time it's just the PGEs, permanents.' This worker recognised that missing out on such training opportunities - particularly the chance to acquire licences - could ultimately limit his work prospects: 'when they need a, just say like crane drivers or something like that, and you don't have a ticket, then you can't work' (HFW004).

Almost all of the casual workers interviewed had to fund their own professional development and skills training and received little support from employers to acquire and develop new skills. Moreover, inadequate access to professional development was something that concerned not just casuals but also independent contractors, who also had to self-fund their professional development.

Those interviewed could neither afford the time nor the money to undertake professional development, as this would mean missing out on paid work. Also, the irregular and uncertain nature of their work scheduling created difficulties in pursuing professional development. 'I don't get a lot of opportunities,' an independent contractor working as a claims investigator explained, continuing: 'Well basically, you have to pay for them yourself, and then it's the time. And nine times out of ten, as I said, you try and organise something and then it all goes pear shaped' (HFW028, 2009). Even independent contractors who were *de facto* employees, in the sense that they always worked for the same client, found that they received little support to advance their skills. As one said:

A while ago I was thinking of this optical fibre stuff coming out, might be worth trying to do an optical fibre course. I rang up the TAFE down in Melbourne and it's a...I think they said [it was a] 3 month or something like that course. I thought I could take that amount of time off work to go and do that, pay for it all myself and all that type of stuff; just can't do it, no. Like you'd ask [ ] and they'd probably just encourage you to do it but they wouldn't

help you out at all...So it's not encouraged to further your development that's for sure. *You just get put in your hole* and that's what you do (HFW023; my emphasis)

The exclusion of casual employees and independent contractors from professional development and training activities could, in the long term, confine these workers to less skilled and less challenging roles where the opportunities to experience practical recognition of their subjectivity are comparably diminished. In other words, the casualisation of work threatens to entrench the effects of the detailed division of labour on workers' subjectivity by limiting occupational mobility within the economy and confining non-standard workers to less skilled roles through the denial of employer-provided training and career development opportunities.

However, it is not the diminished opportunities for professional development and skills training that represent the principal threat posed by non-standard employment arrangements to workers' practical self-realisation. Arguably, the most significant threat to workers' practical self-realisation stems from the effect that the employment uncertainty associated with casual employment in particular, but also independent contracting to a lesser extent, can have on workers' practical activity outside of work.

Recall that, although Hegel focuses on the role of work in enabling individuals to experience themselves concretely as persons capable of shaping the world around them, work is only one form of practical activity that can fulfil this role. Indeed, any form of intentional activity that involves executing ideas and plans to creatively shape and affect the world can be a source of practical self-realisation. In this respect, even if the content of a worker's job is complex, it can be difficult for workers to experience their work activity as a liberating activity through which they can shape the world around them if their ongoing employment uncertainty and job insecurity prevents them from taking control of their life and from realising their non-work related goals and ambitions. In this respect, whether a particular type of employment affords workers a greater or lesser opportunity to experience a practical realisation of their subjectivity depends not just on whether the work activity itself is complex or routine but also on how a person's work affects his/her ability to shape the world around him/her more generally. Does his/her

work provider him/her with the emotional, leisure, and material resources that s/he needs to pursue central life projects?

For some independent contractors I interviewed—and one or two casuals—the ‘flexibility’ of their employment contract evidently did help them to achieve their non-work related aims and ambitions, as the control they had over their working hours enabled them to balance their work and family commitments. But the workers in this situation were typically either skilled professionals whose skills were in high demand—hence they could be almost certain of future work—or people who were not reliant on their employment as their partner or spouse was the main source of income for the household and had a reliable, permanent job. As a temping agency worker who valued casual employment because it enabled her to juggle her working hours around looking after her children put it: ‘I think if you’re going to temp you need to make sure you’ve got a permanent income coming in from somewhere else. What sort, I don’t know but there needs to be, otherwise you would get really stressed’ (HFW024).

For those who were reliant on the income from casual employment or independent contracting, however, the ‘flexibility’ of their employment contract was often a major impediment to their achieving their goals and ambitions outside of work. Notably, casual employees and independent contractors in Australia are twice as likely as other workers to work in a job where the hours and pay fluctuate substantially from week to week (ABS 2009a: 23; ABS 2009b: 22) and many—if not most—of those interviewed said that they regularly experienced lengthy periods without work.

Such uncertain work patterns can create ‘constant anxiety about meeting financial obligations’ and ‘undermine] a worker’s ability to fulfil social roles (for example, as provider)’ (Facey and Eakin 2010: 337). As a secondary teacher who was about to be laid off for the summer explained: ‘I end up getting incredibly broke, very depressed, borrow money left right and centre to pay the mortgage, to pay the power, to buy food and then spend first term paying it all back....I’m not suicidal but I feel like it sometimes though, I do. I’ve actually got bald patches all over my head from just, yeah, anxiety...How can I make ends meet, will we get below this summer, how can I buy presents for my children?’ (HFW036).

Those interviewed frequently struggled to plan anything beyond work. ‘Sometimes I work one day a week, sometimes four days a week... You cannot predict it,’ explained a factory labourer and single mother in Shepparton. ‘You make appointments and then you cancel them because you’ve been called to work.... You’ve got to take it while it’s there - you might turn it down this week and you don’t get asked to work next week’ (HFW025).

Many of those interviewed struggled to go on holidays and even to meet important needs, such as health and dental care, because of financial concerns. For example, an aged care attendant who had since become permanent part-time explained that she had needed a sinus operation while she was working as a casual but had to postpone the operation because she couldn’t afford to take the time off to have it: ‘I had to have a sinus operation and that meant I would have been off work for about four weeks. I had to wait until I went permanent part time’ (HFW051).

A telecommunications sub-contractor who was struggling to get enough hours work hadn’t had a holiday in two years and, even then, it was for only a week. ‘It’s that tight at the moment,’ he explained: ‘you can’t afford to take a day off.’ Moreover, when he returned from his holiday, his boss ‘got a bit shirty’ with him for being away, which has made him more reluctant to take time off again in case it upsets his boss and causes him to lose future work (HFW023). This was something that casuals were also acutely aware of—‘you don’t rock the boat’ (HFW068). Uncertain hours and unpredictable earnings were placing many casuals in particular in a situation of dependency, with the result that they had to put the rest of their life on hold just so that they could secure enough work to make ends meet.

A typical situation would be that you didn’t get a job during the week and your only job come up and it was on Saturday, Sunday...and it would be one of your kids’ birthdays, or it’d be something that your Mrs had been saying for three weeks, “Oh we’re going to such and such’s on Saturday 18 October.” “Yep, yep, no worries.” The time would come and you couldn’t knock back the only job for the week (HFW007).

Far from experiencing the flexibility of their employment arrangement as contributing positively to their freedom, these workers felt that the ‘flexibility’ of their employment contract severely curtailed their ability to shape the world around them. ‘When you’re hired as a seasonal...’

explained a factory labourer in Shepparton, ‘there’s no security, *you can’t do anything*, you can’t go in for a loan, *you’re a nobody*’ (HFW026; my emphasis).

## **Social Recognition and Work**

As a practical activity that occupies such a large proportion of their lives, the work that people do is a central element in the development of their subjectivity. In Hegel’s words, it is through practical activity that ‘man brings himself before himself’ (Hegel 1975:31). But work is not just a practical activity: it is also a social activity that takes place ‘in a human world characterised by relationships of inequality, power, and domination’ (Dejours 2006: 56).

The social dimension of work is an equally important element in the development of subjectivity. The importance of social recognition in enabling individuals’ to firmly grasp and be assured of their subjectivity is a central component—if not the central component—of Hegel’s philosophy of recognition. ‘Everyone wants to count for the other,’ as Hegel explains, because ‘it is everyone’s purpose to perceive himself in the other’ (Hegel 1967:210, cited in Avineri 1971:99). Axel Honneth captures the essence of Hegel’s philosophy of recognition when he states that ‘the integrity of our identity is dependent on the experience of inter-subjective recognition’ and on our ‘receiving approval and respect from others’ (Honneth 1992:188). If others do not acknowledge and respect us for who we are as persons this threatens the security of our personhood and the integrity of our self-image.

The upshot of Hegel’s claims about the centrality of inter-subjective recognition to the development of subjectivity is that it is only ‘by taking, and being taken by, others as persons’ that we can see ourselves fully (or concretely) as persons (Ikaheimo 2010:356). Indeed, Hegel goes so far as to say that the individual subject only exists ‘when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists *only* in being acknowledged’ (Hegel 1977: para. 178; my emphasis).

In today’s work-oriented societies, the work that people do is often a critical determinant of the quality of their experience of social recognition. As Cobb explains in *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, social legitimacy in capitalist societies ‘comes primarily from what a person produces, and it is from this that inferences are drawn about who he

essentially *is*' (Sennett & Cobb 1993:265,268). Moreover, when the work that we do is appreciated and celebrated by colleagues and supervisors, this helps us to see that what we do is meaningful and that our agency has objective value. Such recognition buttresses our sense of self-respect and self-esteem and elicits a feeling of belonging to a valued community (Dejours 2010:59). The pain of unemployment, in this respect, is that it 'deprives the [person] of the right to contribute...and therefore of the chance to benefit from the precious reward that recognition constitutes' (Dejours & Deranty 2010: 172).

But it is not just unemployment that deprives people of the chance to be recognised as contributing members of society. Work environments too can threaten people's experience of self if workers feel that their efforts within the workplace are not being adequately acknowledged by their peers and employers. This is powerfully illustrated in the robustness of the association between effort-reward imbalance and health.

According to the effort-reward imbalance model of job-stress, the employment relationship functions as a kind of social contract in which there is an implicit understanding that employees' physical and psychological efforts will be reciprocally rewarded through (a) money, (b) recognition and esteem from colleagues, or (c) promotion and greater job security (Kuper *et al.* 2002:777; Siegrist 2005:1034). When employees' efforts and contributions are not rewarded in kind, an effort-reward imbalance occurs. Notably, the experience of effort-reward has been consistently linked to increased risk of heart disease, poorer mental health and physical health functioning, as well as higher incidence of diabetes, sickness absence and alcohol dependence (Marmot *et al.* 1999:125; de Jonge *et al.* 2000:1322; Benach *et al.* 2007:160).

Explaining the link between effort-reward imbalance and workers' health, Siegrist writes that 'the work role can act as a source of recurrent positive experience of self-esteem. This is the case when achievements that meet or even exceed expectations are reciprocated by equitable rewards or when collaboration occurs in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust' (Siegrist 2005:1034). However, recurrent violation of the norm of reciprocity can elicit 'a sense of being treated unfairly and suffering injustice' (Siegrist and Marmot 2004:1467) giving rise to 'feelings of threat, anger, and depression or demoralisation' (Siegrist 1996:30).

## Social Recognition at Work in the New Economy

Unfortunately, the experiences of those interviewed suggest that recurrent violations of the norm of reciprocity—and associated impacts on workers' subjectivity and self-esteem—are commonplace among those working in non-standard forms of employment, particularly casual employment. This appears to be less of an issue for independent contractors who, in many cases, think of themselves as their own boss and derive a sense of self-esteem from working for themselves. However, casual employees—particularly long-term casuals—tend to perceive their very employment status as a form of misrecognition or denial of their subjectivity. This is because casuals perceive their employment status as an *inferior* form of employment. Long-term casuals often see their ongoing exclusion from the benefits and protections that permanent workers enjoy as a failure by employers to reciprocally recognise their work contributions and commitment. For example, in a 2007 Canadian study of temporary employment, a number of temporary workers said that their employment status 'led to a feeling of having been swindled and exploited that undermined them psychologically and physically' (Malenfant *et al.* 2007: 832). Many of the casuals interviewed in regional and rural Victoria echoed this sentiment. As an art teacher who had spent years working as a casual secondary and TAFE teacher explained:

I feel as though I'm being exploited and I am being exploited...I fill in and I do everything that's required and still no permanent job. I don't know what to do. I'm looking to get out of teaching altogether because I'm not being looked after and I'm not surprised there's a shortage of teachers because if this is the way they treat people it's not surprising, is it? (HFW036)

'We're used as fodder,' said a labour-hire construction worker near Shepparton. As he went on to explain, 'They're making a ... fortune off us. The bloke that takes you on as an employee is doing all right and the bloke who is grabbing that hourly rate. You're *just the mug* in between' (HFW029; my emphasis). Among the casuals interviewed, there was a general sense that employers took no interest in them, with most reporting that they were regularly excluded from meetings and other work events in which permanent workers would participate. This conveyed the impression that they were less than equal, or not real,

workers. As a sessional TAFE teacher in Northern Victoria explained, ‘they definitely make a distinction between the things that they will invite all the sessionals to and the casuals to, and the things that they will invite the *real* workers to’ (HFW062). ‘They had a meeting today,’ commented the art teacher in East Gippsland. ‘I wasn’t invited; *I’m just a nobody basically*, and it does terrible things to your self-esteem I can tell you. I do painting on the side, that’s my therapy. If I didn’t do that I think I would have been locked up a long time ago because *it just squashes your self esteem*’ (HFW036; my emphasis).

One casual who worked at a food packaging factory in East Gippsland had been employed as a permanent employee at the factory for more than 20 years before being offered a redundancy and subsequently made casual. He noticed a huge shift in his level of involvement in the workplace once he was made casual, even though he continued to regularly work long hours at the factory:

I sort of sense being a casual...you don't get involved in any decisions or anything like that, so I suppose you do feel a bit at arm lengths to the place...Sometimes, I suppose, you get the feeling they're only using you, which they probably are, because once you've finished the work, that's it, you go home, you don't get paid or anything, so that's it. You're just there to do the work that's there for whatever hours it is and then you go home, and that's it (HFW043).

The sense of being ‘only a casual’ is something that has been identified in previous studies of casual employment in Australia. For example, in Pocock *et al.*’s study of casual employment in South Australia, loss of self-esteem—especially among older men—and being treated as ‘less than proper workers, despite the commitment that they make to their work’, were key grievances among casuals (Pocock, Prosser and Bridge 2004:14-15). Many of the casuals interviewed in my study reported similar experiences.

‘The permanents, they make you feel second-class,’ explained a factory worker in Shepparton (HFW025). ‘You did almost feel a bit second-class at times,’ agreed a stevedore who had worked as a casual for more than a decade before being made permanent, adding: “‘You’re just a casual,’ you know what I mean?’ (HFW007). Fruit pickers who were interviewed frequently made comments to the effect that ‘at the end of the day, we’re “just pickers”’ (HFW055 and HFW055). A casual factory worker in

Ballarat went so far as to describe he and his fellow casuals as ‘grunts’ and ‘shit-kickers’. ‘That’s all we are,’ he asserted (HFW011).

Besides being regarded—and feeling that they are regarded—as less than equal workers by employers and permanent co-workers, there is also evidence to suggest that being employed as a non-standard worker undermines people’s opportunities to develop meaningful and supportive relationship with their co-workers. This is a further way in which non-standard employment can threaten workers’ opportunity to experience social recognition of their subjectivity in and through their work. Significantly, it is an issue that seems to affect not just casuals but also some independent contractors.

As Facey and Eakin have pointed out, ‘by virtue of their ongoing interactions with co-workers’, people working in permanent full-time employment ‘have the opportunity to develop shared values, orientations and activities’ (Facey & Eakin 2010: 339). But many casuals and independent contractors have intermittent and highly irregular work schedules. They can work 10 hours one week, 20 the next. Occasionally, they might even find that they have no work for 4 or 5 weeks. This makes forming relationships with co-workers more difficult. As a casual bank nurse in her 20s explained: ‘I guess being casual you wouldn’t build the same sort of rapport you would if you were working the same places five days a week, all the time for two years or one year even’ (HFW014). This was an issue that also affected some independent contractors who were required to travel to multiple work locations by their employers, with the result that they rarely had sustained contact with a core group of colleagues. ‘It’s very isolated,’ said a Workcover claims investigator in central Victoria. ‘There’s companies [that she worked for] that I’ve never actually been to,’ she went on to explain. ‘We talk on the phone constantly but never met them face to face, or interacted, or socialised with them. I suppose where I actually feel it is at Christmas...because I’m hooning around all these places, they’re organising all their Christmas do’s’ (HFW028).

Those interviewed explained that it’s not just the intermittency of their contacts with co-workers that can affect their ability to form friendships and meaningful relationships within the workplace. As a number of casuals pointed out, the need to compete with other workers for shifts, and the perception that they are eroding permanent employees’ job security by their mere presence, can have a corrosive effect on co-worker

relations. For example, employment contracts that provide workers with no guaranteed minimum number of shifts or any legal expectation of ongoing work can breed a corrosive competitiveness, as workers feel that they must compete with each other for shifts or for future employment contracts. This can lead workers to withhold knowledge and resources from each other. Some fruit-pickers explained that other pickers would even try to sabotage their equipment so as to ensure that there was more fruit available for them to pick:

They [other pickers] even tamper with your machine and everything... They do a lot of nasty things to people who are good picking (HFW054);

you think you've got a good relationship with [other pickers] but then sort of like, you know, you have to be the favourite of the contractors, you know?...sometimes you get a friend, but then you couldn't at the end of the day really, you know, you might think they're a friend but they'll backstab you just to get the favourite from the contractors. And...like I said before, I don't really blame like other people for it, you know, because everyone are trying to survive; their family, they're trying to provide for their families and I'm not going to say, you know...you know, if my friend did that to me I will say, oh well, it's sad that she or he picked that side, but you know, I know she's trying to survive (HFW064).

The casualisation of work can also affect the quality of relations between permanent workers and their nonstandard co-workers if, for example, permanent workers view the employment of casuals and independent contractors as a threat to their own job security (Boyce *et al.* 2007: 11).

Depending upon the extent to which they feel they are at risk of being replaced by casual workers or independent contractors, permanent workers may seek to undermine the status of casuals and independent contractors within the work organisation as a way of protecting their own jobs. This may involve withholding vital information and resources so as to undermine casuals' and independent contractors' ability to succeed in their jobs, in the hope of proving to management that non-standard workers are incapable of doing the jobs that permanent workers currently do. In some cases, the fear that they might be replaced by casuals or independent contractors might motivate permanent workers to harass and bully these non-standard workers as a way of forcing them out of the

workplace. Amongst those interviewed, there was some evidence of this occurring.

‘It’s the stress that [permanents] cause, it’s so much stress,’ a factory labourer in Shepparton explained. She went on: ‘The casuals get on the phone to each other after work to discuss the terrible things that happened during the day...They never want you to know anything about the machines, which I guess comes from them being threatened by us. I don’t know. We’re not allowed to know how the machines work in case we know too much’ (HFW025, 2009). An integration aid in a TAFE in Northern Victoria likewise commented that she felt that there was ‘a much more competitive feeling and a much more stressful feeling than there used to be.’ As she explained: ‘the permanents might feel, “my job can go casual.”...I have definitely felt that coming from people, that, “Oh God, they’re putting on a casual. What do they think? My work can be done in only a certain amount of time and that you don’t have to have any real knowledge”’ (HFW062).

These examples illustrate that being employed on casual basis can seriously undermine the opportunities available to workers to experience social recognition of their subjectivity through their work. The very fact of being employed on a casual rather than permanent basis can be perceived by workers as a denial of their subjectivity. Moreover, the fewer opportunities that casuals have to participate in decision-making processes within the workplace and their exclusion from meetings and other work events can reinforce the perception that they are less than equal workers. Finally, the competitiveness that non-standard employment arrangements can breed in terms of workers’ having to compete for shifts and for future contracts, coupled with the perception that non-standard workers are a threat to the job security of permanent workers, can also corrode the quality of social relationships within the workplace. This can further limit the opportunities available to casuals to experience social recognition through work.

Social misrecognition of their subjectivity within the workplace appears to be less of an issue for independent contractors. The independent contractors who were interviewed did not see their employment status as such an inferior form of employment to permanent employment in the way that casuals did. This is possibly because they were generally better paid than casuals. Moreover, most also worked in industries, such as construction or agricultural contracting, where employment as an

independent contract was commonplace. Hardly any of the independent contractors interviewed worked alongside permanent co-workers. Finally, a number of independent contractors placed considerable value on the fact they were 'their own boss.' As an agricultural contractor near Leongatha explained:

'I've been my own boss - I worked for Dad when I left school, worked for another guy but it was only, pretty much, subbying work so you're pretty much if you didn't want to go to work one day you didn't, you know. That was your loss, or my loss. I've pretty much been my own boss now so to go and answer to someone it would be pretty hard (HFW020)

Nevertheless, like casuals, some independent contractors found that their opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with their work co-workers were limited by their intermittent and irregular work patterns and by having to change workplaces regularly. Moreover, in industries where a greater proportion of workers are employed on a permanent basis there is also a danger that independent contractors could be perceived as a threat to other workers' job security, even if this did not appear to be an issue for those interviewed. Independent contractors in such situations may be no less vulnerable than casuals to harassment and social exclusion at the hands of their permanent co-workers.

## **Conclusion**

Workers in Australia are increasingly being employed via non-standard employment contracts, such as casual employment and independent contracting, that deprive them of the hard - won benefits of standard employment, such as regular full-time work with paid leave entitlements and protection against unfair dismissal. These employment arrangements are justified on the grounds that they provide business with greater flexibility in adjusting to peaks and troughs in the demand cycle, while also providing workers with greater freedom to structure their work patterns around family commitments. However, the argument developed in this article broadly supports critics' concern that these recent changes in the social organisation of work have merely resulted in workers having to bear 'the burden of organizational and economic performance as never before' (Scott 2004: 145).

The experiences of casual employees and independent contractors living and working in rural Victoria suggests that the ‘flexibility’, lack of job security, and reduced entitlements associated with these forms of employment hinder workers from experiencing practical and social recognition of their subjectivity as independent agents capable of shaping the world around them. At a practical level, the more limited training and professional development opportunities that casual employees and independent contractors receive means that these workers are at greater risk of remaining in less skilled work roles over the long run. Moreover, the employment uncertainty and lack of job security associated with non-standard working arrangements can also hinder worker’s practical agency beyond the workplace, as is illustrated by the difficulties that many of those interviewed encountered in planning their lives in both the short and longer term. But the greatest threat that these new forms of employment pose to the development of workers’ subjectivity arguably comes from the way in which employment via a non-standard employment contract can inhibit the social recognition of workers’ identity as persons of equal worth and dignity. For example, the perception that casual employees are less than equal (or not real) workers is widespread, even among casual workers themselves. The exclusion of casuals from meetings and other events at work reinforces this perception and confirms to casuals that, in the eyes of their employer, *they are a nobody*.

Admittedly, there are a number of limitations of this analysis that indicate the need for further research into the generalisability of the experiences reported here. For instance, the concerns identified in this article rely on the experiences of only a small number of casuals and independent contractors living and working in rural Victoria, while the independent contractors interviewed were mainly concentrated in two industries: construction and agriculture. If we are to more confidently predict the wider consequences of changes in the social organisation of work for the role of work in contributing to the development of worker’s subjectivity, further research needs to consider the experiences of independent contractors and casuals in other industries, and whether their experiences are broadly similar to the experiences of those reported in this article.

It is also important to acknowledge that the role of gender in mediating the relationship between the experience of work and the development of subjectivity has not been considered in any detail in this article.

However, the traditional gendered patterning of social roles may mean that the experience of work plays less significant a role in the development of women's subjectivity. For example, epidemiological studies suggest that psychological conditions in the workplace, such as low control over work tasks, bear more greatly on men's psychological wellbeing than women's, whereas the degree of control that people have in the domestic sphere appears to be more significant a determinant of women's wellbeing (Vermeulen and Mustard 2000). If this is the case, then the casualisation of work may pose less of an overall threat to the development of workers' subjectivity than suggested here, given the disproportionate number of women working in casual employment. Indeed, the casualisation of work may even contribute positively to women's subjectivity if the flexibility of these employment arrangements enables women to better balance work and family commitments.

However, the experiences of workers in rural Victoria reported in this article suggest that the flexibility of casual employment actually prevents workers from realising their ambitions outside of the workplace. The uncertainty of their work scheduling and their lack of job security forces them to put the rest of their lives on hold for the sake of maintaining their employment. Moreover, among the casual employees interviewed, women and men appeared to be equally affected by experiences of misrecognition and exclusion within the workplace in response to the lower status of casual employees.<sup>6</sup>

A final limitation of the analysis is the lack of consideration of permanent employees' experience of work and the opportunities available to them to experience practical and social recognition of their subjectivity in and through their work. It is possible that permanent employees may be just as affected by a lack of control over their work and a lack of recognition within the workplace. Hence, further comparative analysis of the experiences of casual employees and independent contractors, on the one hand, and the experiences of permanent employees, on the other hand, is warranted. Nonetheless, the experiences of those casual employees and independent contractors interviewed do point to structural features of non-standard employment

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6 The number of female independent contractors interviewed (one) was too small to allow for meaningful comparison between men and women's experience of independent contracting.

relationships that evidently pose a particular threat to the development of workers' subjectivity. They suggest that the flexibility of these arrangements may be breeding a debilitating uncertainty that weakens workers' practical agency outside of work and corrodes solidarity within the workplace. And they further suggest that the lower status associated with casual employment in particular may also have profound implications for workers' development of self-esteem, while the reduced access to training and professional development can limit workers' occupational mobility and increase their risk of remaining in routine jobs where the opportunities to experience practical self-realisation are more limited.

Hence, while there are obvious limitations with the scope of the analysis of this article, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the changes in the social organisation of work being wrought by the rise of casual employment and independent contracting threaten the future of work as a source of personal identity, self-esteem, and social belonging, particularly for less-skilled workers on low-incomes who are more vulnerable to experiences of job insecurity and the uncertain scheduling of work.

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