"The Staircase Model" – Labor Control of Temporary Agency Workers in a Swedish Call Center

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the labor control practices implemented in a call center with extensive contracting of temporary agency workers (TAWs). More specifically, the article focuses on how structural and ideological power works in this setting and on the effects of this control for TAWs' working conditions. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted with TAWs, regular employees, and a manager in a call center specializing in telecommunication services in Sweden. The results show that ideological power is important in adapting the interests of TAWs to correspond with those of temporary work agencies (TWAs) and their client companies, in this case the call center. The results also show how ideological power is mixed with structural control in terms of technological control systems and, most importantly, a systematic categorization of workers in a hierarchical structure according to their value to the call center. By systemically categorizing workers in the staircase model, a structural inequality is produced and reproduced in the call center. The motives for working in the call center are often involuntary and are caused by the shortage of work other than a career in support services. As a consequence, feelings of insecurity and an awareness of the precarious nature of their assignment motivate TAWs to enhance their performance and hopefully take a step up on the staircase. This implies new understandings of work where job insecurity has become a normal part of working life.

KEYWORDS

Call center / flexible staffing strategies / ideological power / labor control / technological control / TWAs.

Introduction

This article focuses on the structural use of contracting through temporary work agencies (TWAs) as an extended selection and recruitment procedure in a call center. The call centers, as well as TWAs, are relatively young industries that have grown rapidly since the mid-1990s and constitute examples of organizations whose activities are direct responses to increasing demands for flexibility in the labor market. This makes research on these industries of special interest and, as Doellgast et al. (2009) argue, call centers offer useful settings through which to study 'the politics of restructuring' because of their high proportion of labor costs, which makes it important for them to find ways to cut down labor costs. Furthermore, in both industries, young people and women are overrepresented, and these industries offer many young people their first real job

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opportunity (e.g., Åberg and Funseth 2009; Storrie 2003). One explanation of this could be their difficulty in finding jobs because of high unemployment rates: youth unemployment rates are as high in Sweden as in the rest of Europe (Eurostat 2001). This highlights the fact that these industries can give women and young people in particular a chance to establish themselves in the labor market. It is therefore important to study their experiences of working in these industries. This study will contribute to an understanding of the flexible staffing strategies and the controlling practices that are implemented in a call center with extensive use of contracted workers from TWAs and the consequences for their working conditions. The study is based on interviews with temporary agency workers (TAWs) as well as regular employees and a manager in a call center.

In Sweden, temporary agency work is seen as a form of employment which, like other forms of employment, should follow general employment legislation that provides significant protection to all workers, including TAWs (Bergström 2005; Coe et al. 2009; Knox 2010; Storrie 2003). The weak labor market regulation and strong social protection have affected the development of the TWA sector in Sweden. Growth and restructuring in the context of Sweden's 'social democratic welfare regime' (see Esping-Andersen 1990) have produced a 'managed flexibility' quite different from development under 'neo-liberal conditions' (Coe et al. 2009:67).

The TAWs work in client companies, but are employed by an agency (Bergström 2005; Connelly and Gallagher 2004; Houseman 2001). TAWs, as other forms of 'temporary' workers, may have varied skills or different educational backgrounds. They may also be working full time or part-time and have short- or long-term employment (Doherty 2009; Olsen and Kalleberg 2004). The most common terms used to describe the two most common employment relationships present in the Swedish labor market are 'contract until further notice' and 'limited duration contract.' These terms are not common outside Sweden so I will henceforth use the terms 'open-ended contracts' and 'fixed-term contracts' instead. Since TWAs in Sweden are treated like any other business, it is common for TAWs to be employed with open-ended contracts after a six-month probationary contract (Håkansson and Isidorsson 2007).

The TAWs are covered by collective agreements and their trade union membership provides a guaranteed salary of 75%–90% of their salary when they have no assignment (Knox 2010; Storrie 2003). The guaranteed salary implies that agencies need to be efficient in matching TAWs who have no current assignments with jobs, in order not to be forced to pay the guaranteed salary (Bergström 2005).

The overall aim of this article is to examine the flexible staffing strategies and the labor control practices implemented in a call center with extensive contracting of TAWs. More specifically, the article focuses on how structural and ideological power works in this setting and the effects of this control for TAWs' working conditions.

The management in the call center has developed a hierarchical model for categorization of workers' value to the organization: a staircase model. This article will analyze how this categorization functions as controlling and motivating practices in the call center by using theories described by Koene and van Riemsdijk (2005) and Lepak and Snell (1999). I will also highlight how this categorization interacts with technological and ideological control. Following the findings of Degiuli and Kollmeyers' (2007) study of labor control in the Italian temporary work industry, the article will examine how organizational practices based on ideological power play important roles in labor control processes.

The article is structured as follows. In the first part, I conduct a short overview of related research and the theoretical perspectives. In the second part, the research design of this study is described. The third part presents the results and is followed by concluding discussion in the fourth part.

Related research

The contracting of staff from TWAs is a strategy designed to increase organizational flexibility by externalizing some aspects of the employment relationship (Connelly and Gallagher 2004; Storrie 2007) and to adjust the size of the workforce to changes in demand for their services and products (Atkinson 1984; Bergström 2003; Byoung-Hoon and Frenkel 2004; Houseman 2001; Kalleberg 2001, 2003). The reasons for such contracting are varied and involve both temporary solutions to urgent staffing problems and planned long-term strategies for securing staffing needs (Burgess and Connell 2006) and finding people for future employment (Houseman 2001).

In call centers, the number of temporary workers with flexible employment contracts is relatively high (Holman et al. 2007; Schalk and van Rijkevorsel 2007:509), whereas call centers may use TAWs as a 'safety valve' to meet client demands and increase flexibility (Rubery et al. 2004:1202). In Sweden, as well as in many countries, the call center industry has become a new source of employment (Belt 2002:51) and an important source of direct communication with customers (Holman et al. 2007; Russell 2008; Schalk and van Rijkevorsel 2007). The activities in call centers have, over the last decade, developed rapidly and are subjected to 'continuous and often rapid change' (Glucksmann 2004:800). The emergence of new jobs, in this case service workers in call centers, implies a subdivision of existing jobs and a division of labor within the workplace in terms of occupational structure and hierarchy (Glucksmann 2004). Jobs have been described as low skilled and routinized, involving little employee discretion (Batt and Moynihan 2002; Jenkins et al. 2010), having low status and low wages, with few career prospects (Deery and Kinnie 2002:4) and little job satisfaction (Belt 2002). However, studies have also found a greater diversity in call center work involving complex operations with greater responsibility which require skilled and valued professionals (Batt and Moynihan 2002; Deery and Kinnie 2002; Jenkins et al. 2010:548). Although call centers have often been described as offering few possibilities for career advancement, Belt (2002:64) states that it is important not to characterize work in call centers as 'careerless.'

One effect of the use of contracted workers is that the hiring organization, in this case the call center, is faced with a workforce with differences in employment conditions, wages, and status although they might have the same duties. When TAWs and regular employees work together, TAWs are found to have less favorable working conditions compared with other employees (Nienhüser and Matiaske 2006), less autonomy and fewer possibilities to influence holidays, days off, and the pace of work (Letourneux 1998). The possibilities to refuse, accept, or even choose between assignments is often constrained by the limited access to work opportunities (Garsten 2008:16–17). This means that flexible staffing arrangements, such as contracting staff from TWAs, creates new organizational boundaries and may lead to new forms of inequality between TAWs and regulars (Garsten 2003:260). Such inequality can cause tension between regulars and TAWs and influence their work-related attitudes toward the hiring organization

(Byoung-Hoon and Frenkel 2004). These differences make it interesting to carry out the examination set out in this article.

By way of summary, the article focuses on how structural, technological, and ideological control works in a call center with extensive use of TAWs and the effects of this control for TAWs' working conditions. There is an extensive body of research on the organization of work and control in call centers as well as research on temporary agency work. However, relatively little is known about the organization and control of agency workers in call centers in a Swedish context. Since young people are overrepresented in TWAs and call centers, this setting offers excellent opportunities to examine young workers' thoughts and experiences of establishing themselves in a labor market with high youth unemployment rates. The Swedish context, where TAWs are employed on open-ended or fixed-term contracts in TWAs and there are adherent collective agreements, raises questions about if and how their working conditions are different compared with regular employees in client organizations. This study contributes to an understanding of TAWs' experiences of the controlling practices and the consequences of the controlling practices in relation to their working conditions in a Swedish context.

Theoretical perspectives

During the industrial era, the methods and strategies by which management exerted control and discipline over its workers were often formal and bureaucratic. As organizational structure has become less bureaucratic, management has placed greater emphasis on getting workers to voluntarily regulate their behavior and adjust to the policies set by the management. Thus, different forms of labor control coexist and interact in complex combinations. For example, electronic surveillance and bureaucratic, cultural, and personal control are used in combination by management in contemporary organizations (Degiuli and Kollmeyer 2007; Thompson and Smith 2010). In what follows, the theoretical points of departure are described, starting with the hierarchical categorization of workers and followed by technological and ideological control.

Modes of employment

Call center work can be described as ranging from highly repetitive with short call times to more complex calls that demand more skilled workers. According to Batt (2000), telecommunication companies were found to discriminate between services to high-value customers and those with a lower value. As a consequence, employees servicing these customers were managed differently in terms of the number and length of calls, control, discretion, and the skills required to perform their work. In addition to these differences, the use of TAWs in call centers implies a division between employees depending on their value and availability to the organization. By categorization of employees' value to the organization and the uniqueness of their skills, Lepak and Snell (1999) describe four different 'employment modes.' In the first mode, *internal development*, human capital is described as core employees that are both valuable and unique. The second mode, *acquiring*, consists of valuable but not unique employees that are available throughout the labor market. Contracted TAWs represent the third mode, *contracting*, which con-

tains human capital that is 'generic and of limited strategic value' with skills that can be purchased easily on the open labor market. Therefore, these workers can be treated essentially as a commodity. Finally, in the fourth mode, *alliances*, human capital is seen as unique in some way that refers to an external relationship or partnership.

Koene and van Riemsdijk (2005), in turn, suggest three different approaches to the management of the temporary workforce. Firstly, organizations can make clear distinctions between TAWs and regulars. TAWs are treated as undifferentiated and expendable commodities. There are strict and narrow task descriptions and in principle no selection of who is hired. Secondly, the client company can choose to make no distinction between temps and regulars. There is some selection of who is hired and the training is limited to basic training. Thirdly, the client company can pay special attention to temps and their specific needs and also to their contributions to the organization. There are careful selections of temps, specific task descriptions, and extensive training.

Based on this categorization, managers in client organizations can decide on the most strategic and appropriate way to manage relations with each type of employee and to motivate and control their performance. In fact, TAWs are generally seen as easy to replace and of relatively low value for the organization (Koene and van Riemsdijk 2005; Lepak and Snell 1999). It is therefore possible to anticipate the coexistence of a status divide between workers in the same workplace (Byoung-Hoon and Frenkel 2004).

Technological and ideological control as controlling practices

Besides these segregating practices, technological monitoring systems can have a major influence on control and social cohesion and perceived autonomy over work (Bélanger 2006). Information technology has changed the nature of work in many occupations and has created new possibilities for management control. In call centers, the whole working process is subjected to technological control by monitoring and measurement of calls and also the standardization of customer service (i.e., Deery and Kinnie 2002). This technical control focuses on 'average handling time and time spent off the phone.' But the system can also give information about the way each worker handles each customer by controlling for which programs the worker has used (Bélanger 2006:341). However, work organization in call centers is not uniform and it is therefore important to take account for differences in, for example, which sector of industry the organization is in, call cycle time, management styles, and technological integration (Taylor et al. 2002). These differences also highlight that the depiction of call center workers as subjected to panoptic control might be overestimated (i.e., Fernie and Metcalf 1998). However, technological control is not the only form of control in call centers. In most organizations, the management has tried to create values of good customer service in their employees by cultural or normative control (Deery and Kinnie 2002; Frenkel et al. 1998; Korczynski 2001; Rosenthal 2004). Korczynski et al. (2000) showed how normative control can be used to achieve acceptance of management monitoring and measurement procedures by telling employees that call monitoring is created to achieve good service and customer satisfaction.

In addition, Lukes (2005) argues that power can operate by ideologically shaping peoples thoughts and wishes in a way that might be opposite to their own thoughts. This is underlined by Degiuli and Kollmeyer (2007) who state that ideological power can

play a large role in the labor control process. By drawing on theories of Burawoy (1985) and Gramsci (i.e., Gramsci and Forgacs 2000), they found that management was trying to build hegemony primarily through ideological means. The recent economic changes have made ideological power an important element of hegemonic labor control as new organizational forms are often incompatible with traditional forms of labor control (Degiuli and Kollmeyer 2007).

In their study of the Italian temporary work industry, Degiuli et al. (2007:511) found that ideological power plays crucial roles in 'aligning the perceived interests of temporary workers with those of temporary agencies and their client companies.' Since the boundaries between management and workers in flexible work arrangements are often unclear, internalization of norms, values, and goals is important. They describe labor control in TWAs as based on three organizational practices.

Firstly, the temporary work industry has tried to promote a new understanding of work where job stability belongs to the past. They are seeking to 'characterize job insecurity as a normal part of everyday work.' TWAs openly state that a more flexible labor market has replaced the previous one and offers individuals better opportunities for career advancement if one works hard and takes the initiative.

Secondly, agency work is described as a stepping stone to finding permanent employment (see also De Jong et al. 2009; Korpi and Levin 2001). This means that TAWs are encouraged to extend their best efforts on each assignment in order to avoid the perils of temporary work. If management wants support from its workers, it is important to make meaningful promises to the workers. In order to produce the intended effect, the opportunities for permanent employment in client companies cannot 'merely be a myth.' TAWs do in some cases find permanent employment in client companies, but the chances are often overstated (Degiuli and Kollmeyer 2007:509). Although temps work on a more or less permanent basis in an organization, they can never be sure of ever gaining an open-ended contract in client companies (Burgess and Connell 2006).

Thirdly, this practice 'reinforces hegemony with coercion.' The regulatory framework gives client companies 'the legal right to hire and fire' TAWs as needed (Degiuli and Kollmeyer 2007:512). A worker who is complaining about their working conditions or whose performance is not up to standard can be fired and replaced with someone else on short notice (see also Olofsdotter 2008). Together this helps clients to enhance their flexibility and profitability and gives management effective ways of controlling the workforce.

Data and research methods

The study presented in this article was conducted in a call center with extensive hiring of personnel from several TWAs and with limited recruiting of staff for employment. It is part of a broader investigation of the consequences of contracting staff from TWAs in terms of working conditions, attitudes, and interactions in three client firms: this call center and two manufacturing firms in telecommunication and engineering. This approach has provided a thorough understanding of the consequences of the structural use of contracting through TWAs as an extended selection and recruitment procedure. The call center presented in this article was selected because of the extensive hiring of TAWs and the mainly young workforce for whom this is their first experience of working life.

The call center is located in a small town in the north of Sweden. It is a subdivision of one of the leading suppliers of communication services such as mobile telephones, Internet access, and digital TV in Sweden. The call center provides services to only one client, the parent company. This means that the content of the services is stable and there is mostly low-skilled, routinized telephone support. The call center has contracted TAWs from four different TWAs on a constant basis during the last few years. In the past four years, the relationship between the call center and the TWAs has developed from a temporary cooperation to each of them becoming a 'strategic partner' (compare Connell and Burgess 2006:495). Whenever a vacancy arises in the call center, TWAs deliver the number of demanded TAWs. No staffs are directly recruited for employment by the call center, except in more specialized positions or as managers. Once or twice a year, the call center employs a selected number of TAWs. This means that most of their core staff is made up of former TAWs. There is an agreement that the number of TAWs should not exceed 20%, but at the time of the interviews that percentage was significantly exceeded.

Data collection and analysis

The information was gathered by means of semi-structured interviews with 16 women and men working as TAWs, regular employees in the call center, and the manager of this call center. Nine of those interviewed were TAWs: four women and five men. The seven interviewed regulars were all men; all except one of them had previously worked as TAWs in the call center. All of them were aged between 20 and 30.

The interviews were conducted face to face in a conference room at the call center and lasted for between one and two hours. The interviewees were assured anonymity and, with the participants' permission, the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. As a basis for the interviews, an interview guide with themed issues was used. The interviews took the form of a conversation in which the informants could respond in their own words and with their own descriptions and in which I as researcher could ask supplementary questions (Creswell 2007; Fielding and Thomas 2001).

The interview guide sought to analyze several topics with reference to the hiring of TAWs, including the consequences of strategic recruitment strategies and HR management of a heterogenic workforce. Questions were asked about, for example, employment conditions, career opportunities, recruitment, work organization, flexibility strategies, motivation, and equality.

At the qualitative analysis level, it is important that the researcher becomes familiar with the data. To analyze qualitative data is to systematically examine collected data to identify themes and concepts and look for patterns that might contribute to an understanding of the studied phenomenon (Fielding and Thomas 2001:137). After transcription and the first reading of the transcripts, a more careful reading of the interviews followed. The first step was to code the interviews. In connection with a careful reading of the transcripts, concepts or expressions were written in the margin to describe the content. All data were coded for categorical development and reoccurring patterns (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The transcripts were coded paragraph by paragraph. The intention was to reduce the data to analytical categories, for example, 'control,' or describing categories, for example, employment as TAW or regular, age, or education.

The next step was to categorize codes about the same phenomenon into themes, thereby reducing the data to smaller units, for example, 'ideological control.' This is described as 'pattern coding' by Miles and Huberman (1994:69). Then the encoded material was sorted and added in matrices based on the theoretical concepts.

The choice of quoted excerpts has emerged from the pattern of views that emerged in the matrix. All companies and interviewees are anonymous. The results are presented as selected quotes from the interviews. I have translated the quotes from Swedish.

Results

In the following sections, the consequences of categorizing staff based on their skills and value to the call center are discussed. After that, the ideological power present in everyday practices in the call center is discussed. I argue that the organizational practices in this call center show how strategic staffing practices and categorization of value, technological control, and ideological power coexist and interact as an effective way of motivating and controlling the workforce.

The staircase model: categorization of value for achieving flexibility

The support services at the call center are open almost around the clock seven days a week. To cover these hours, the staff is divided into groups with differences in scheduled working hours and wages. In-group classification also establishes a distinction between TAWs and regular staff. The manager of the call center does not see the unequal working conditions as a problem, but believes that hiring is a prerequisite for the regular staff to have 'decent work.' He continues:

> If we had not hired as many as we have done it would have meant that everyone [regular employees] had to work much more on evenings and at weekends. Our staffing is tailored to the customer calls. (Manager)

This quotation indicates a deliberate strategy to divide the staff into groups with differentiated working hours, where the core staff has the advantage of not having to work at inconvenient times. To achieve this flexibility, TAWs are divided into three different levels to work on an hourly basis to meet the demand at evenings and weekends, usually 10 hours a week, or to work 75% in a team during the evenings and at weekends but with more regular hours. Or we can hire full-time workers to work in teams, with the same schedule as our own staff. (Manager)

He describes how the call center has constructed a staircase model by a hierarchical categorization of workers. The basis for the staircase model is a constant flow of TAWs from level to level, with increased selection of suitable candidates going up to the next level. This segregation constitutes the basic strategy for creating numerical flexibility in the call center. By openly distinguishing between different employment modes (see Lepak and Snell 1999), inequality between workers is legitimized and normalized. This means that a systematic hierarchical segregation is used to motivate workers to improve their performance and their chances of better working conditions (see figure 1).

Figure 1. The 'staircase model' as an extended selection and recruitment procedure by comparison with approaches to operational management (Koene and van Riemsdijk 2005) and employment modes (Lepak and Snell 1999)

The staircase model developed by management in the call center	Employment modes (Lepak and Snell 1999) and approaches to operational HR management (Koene and van Riemsdijk 2005)
X-level: Regular employees employed as experts or managers. Careful selection from A-level or external recruiting.	Internal development of core employees that are valuable and unique.
A-level: Regular employees working in teams at scheduled working hours. Careful selection of temps from B-level. Valued but not unique skills.	Acquiring valuable but not unique employees. Special attention to temporary employees' specific needs and possibilities for the organization. Careful selection of who is hired and specific task descriptions. Extensive training.
B-level: TAWs and regulars working in teams together with the same task at scheduled working hours but with different wages. Most TAWs are recruited from C-level.	Contracting of workers of generic and limited strategic value. No distinction between HR management of temporary and permanent staff. Some selection of who is hired, basic training.
C-level: TAWs working on an hourly basis or at scheduled evenings and weekends. No regulars ever work at C-level.	Contracting of workers of generic and limited strategic value. Clear distinctions between temporary and permanent staff. Temporary staffs treated as expendable and have strict and narrow task descriptions, standardized recruiting, and minimized training.

When new TAWs begin to work in the call center, they usually begin at C-level. They work on an hourly basis and are mostly made up of students who are working part-time or TAWs hired relatively long term, working 75% of their hours as evening and weekend work. This can be compared with the expendable approach to contracted agency workers as described by Koene and Riemsdijk (2005). Their relationship with the call center is based on the expendability of temporary workers. Their skills are considered to be common and easily available on the labor market.

At B-level, contracted agency workers and regulars work together in teams and perform the same tasks. Although no distinction is made in working hours and performance between TAWs and regulars at B-level, there are still large differences in wages. The contracted staff is still seen as an expendable workforce with less value to the organization compared with the regular staff (compare Koene and van Riemsdijk 2005; Lepak and Snell 1999). TAWs are recruited from C-level.

In addition to the levels accessible for TAWs, the staircase model has two more levels that are available for call center employees only: one for regularly employed staff (A-level) and an 'expert' level (X-level) for managers and specialists. In terms of the employment modes described by Lepak and Snell (1999), the A-level consists of acquired

staff employed by the call center. The call center has given special attention to previous TAWs' specific possibilities for the organization. They are selected from B-level because their skills are seen as valuable to the organization, although not unique (see also Koene and van Riemsdijk 2005).

At the X-level are regular employees working in the call center who are considered as both unique and valuable workers. At this level the call center has strategic incentives for the internal development of these employees and plans to offer them a number of advantages. Because of their valuable skills they are viewed as core employees. Recruitment of X-level employees is both from skilled regulars at A-level and from external sources.

Nevertheless, the staffing strategy of offering some TAWs employment once or twice a year is a delicate matter:

> **Manager:** We are facing an interesting problem, sure, you always want the best [employees] while all that are left [TAWs] are OK. But it is not always enough just to be OK if you want to be employed.
>
> **Interviewer:** Can someone be passed over several times?
>
> **Manager:** I would not say overlooked because then we have not done our job. However, maybe there are people who feel they have been overlooked. If this happens twice, it may not seem very funny anymore. It's tough. In this situation, perhaps we should ask ourselves, together with the person, how they feel about the future. For then it might not be right to continue. At the same time, there will always be people who are not selected to be employed each time.

The quotations make clear that there is a well-planned strategy for finding the most valued employees. As not every hard-working TAW can be offered employment, some are passed over. This implies that there is pressure for TAWs to enhance their performance and competition between workers for promotion (see Belt 2002).

The above description of the 'staircase model' is summarized in figure 1. The figure illustrates the hierarchical categorization in the call center and its relationship with the models presented by Koene et al. (2005) and Lepak and Snell (1999).

To further motivate TAWs and regulars to do their utmost, their performances are monitored by technical surveillance systems. A "traffic control" supervises the length of calls, time between calls, the length of breaks, and the number of answered e-mails (see Bélanger 2006). This surveillance is described by a TAW:

> If you have been sitting too long after a call, without taking on a new call, then you might hear it [instructions via their headphones to take another call] directly. There is always someone responsible controlling times for each case in real time. If you are sitting down for too long [between calls] they can say: what are you doing? Go in and take calls again.

When the pressure is high with the incoming calls, they cannot take more than a couple of minutes between calls before traffic control requests workers to take on new calls. If a worker has to leave for a few minutes, for example, for a visit to the lavatory, they have to inform traffic control:

> Then you have to say it. Then it might be OK. But they have still showed that they have control. It is like a self-censorship and that is what they are hoping for. (TAW)

However, it seems that there is more pressure on TAWs. A former TAW who is now working as a regular in the call center underlines these concerns:

> **Male regular:** TAWs are much more careful of the time for handling each case. My experience is that they feel more replaceable and therefore are more careful of how clever and quick they handle things.
>
> **Interviewer:** Do they feel more controlled?
>
> **Male regular:** Perhaps it is about 'if I am going to get this job then I have to show good results'.

Furthermore, the technological surveillance system offers great opportunities for distinguishing between the groups:

> There is a clear difference between TAWs and regulars. TAWs have an "X" before their nickname, so it is obvious if you are a TAW. I understand it as being that having this "X", is almost a disgrace. (Male regular)

This categorization of TAWs and regulars at different levels highlights a well-planned strategy, where the staff is divided as either more or less expendable for the organization based on the value and uniqueness of their skills. This means that the TAWs are treated as a commodity that can be bought or sold on the labor market (Lepak and Snell 1999). Segregating practices are inbuilt in the technological system as a way of controlling the performance according to which group a worker belongs. It's all about the quest for employment in the call center as the only career development available for TAWs working there (e.g., Degiuli and Kollmeyer 2007). Although agency workers are covered by collective agreements in Sweden, the wages of TAWs working in this call center are considerably lower than regulars'. The division of the workforce according to the staircase model, together with technological surveillance of workers' performance, constitutes effective ways of labor control.

Job insecurity as part of everyday work

Restructuring, layoffs, and downsizing to reduce labor costs and enhance competitiveness have, with all that these involve in terms of temporary employment contracts or unemployment, caused feelings of insecurity among workers about their future working life and affected their attitudes to work (Sverke and Hellgren 2002). Some groups are found to experience higher levels of job insecurity, e.g., contingent workers, manual labor, and workers with lower levels of education (Näswall and De Witte 2003). Degiuli et al. (2007) found that experiences of job insecurity as an unavoidable part of contemporary working life are important in establishing a voluntary system of labor control. The interviews with TAWs and regulars working in this call center made visible feelings of insecurity and an awareness of the precarious nature of their assignment. The limited selection of available work in this small town in the north of Sweden minimized the chances of finding other work that they might prefer. Employment as a TAW may be the only available way to avoid unemployment and thereby a stepping stone to the labor market. This is a reality described in the interviews:

> There are not very many IT jobs in this town. People are applying for the jobs that are available. Had it been in a major city, it would not be the same. People feel: what other jobs are there? (Male TAW)

These difficulties are also highlighted by one of the regulars:

> If this is the only job offered instead of jobseeker's allowance, you must of course take the job. Otherwise, you are obliged to use social services. So it is not really voluntary. (Male regular)

These quotations highlight an awareness of their vulnerability as job seekers and employees in this limited labor market and job instability as an inevitable aspect of their working life. This insecurity influences TAWs to do their outmost to keep this assignment by adjusting to working conditions in the call center. Job insecurity can therefore, as Degiuli and Kollmeyer (2007) suggest, function as labor control.

For the mainly young TAWs, many coming directly from upper secondary school or university, this is their first experience of working, but they will probably not intend to continue in the industry:

> In these types of jobs the employment will be relatively casual, you are not supposed to work here for a lifetime. I think that characterizes a great deal, the whole atmosphere. … I do not think you cope with a job like this forever, not under these conditions. I think that very few of them I work with will work here for 10-20 years as used to happen in the past. (Male TAW)

This statement illustrates an understanding of call center work as something you do for a few years because of unsatisfactory working conditions. The quotation also reveals an acceptance and a new understanding of work and employment as continuously changing. This indicates that job instability has become an inevitable aspect of employment.

Prospects of employment in the call center as labor control

The staircase model used by the call center is supposed to be a motivating factor for TAWs to show themselves as competent to obtain one of the few positions as call center employees at A-level. One of the regular staff describes it as a 'competition to become regulars.' The consequence of the careful selection of employees is that not every TAW is offered a position:

> Anyone can become a consultant, but all may not be employed. The [call center] 'competitive recruitment drive' is a race once a year when they employ a few persons. There are several who have worked here for a long time, but they cannot recruit everyone. Those who gain employment have succeeded in some way. (Male regular)

This means that the hierarchical structure between levels is used as a motivating and controlling factor and that TAWs are competing and 'queuing' for higher positions (see, e.g., Belt 2002; Rubery et al. 2004). To achieve regular employment in the call center

is described as a 'sign of appreciation,' but if you do not become employed, there are risks for disappointment and feelings of meaninglessness and resignation if someone gets overlooked:

> Recently, there was a recruitment period; those who were not employed maybe feel like; "Why should I do something for them when I worked for a year and they do not think I will do." So then we can probably get a bit demoralized. (Male TAW)

The regulars show an understanding of and empathy for those who are not offered employment following the selection process. This thoughtfulness is probably caused by the fact that the regular employees all have experiences of working as TAWs in the call center, although they have been successful in achieving employment. The interviews with regulars showed an acceptance of the staircase model:

> There is one point with it. You can motivate yourself to seek training and to perform. There is a plan for how to make a career in the call center. (Male regular)

A female TAW describes how her position has changed over time:

> **Female TAW:** I started and worked just hours, and then there was an "evening" team where you work ten evenings in a row and then are free for four days. And then, I think it was in February, I began working in a "real" team and now I work almost as a regular employee of the call center.
> Interviewer: Are you regularly employed then?
> Female TAW: No, the next step is that I will be a permanent employee in the call center.
> Interviewer: Have you received such a promise or are you hoping?
> Female TAW: No, I have got a promise; I know that I'll start there in a few months.

Her story is a typical example of the staircase model as a motivating and controlling practice. But as one of the male TAWs says, 'It takes too long before it becomes permanent; it takes almost one-and-a-half years.'

 Struggling to achieve a position higher up in the hierarchy is part of a staffing strategy which implies that there is a selection process to find TAWs with valued or unique skills. It also indicates a relatively high turnover of staff, as not every TAW can achieve a position at A-level. This strategy is similar to the 'sacrificial human resource strategy' described by Wallace and Eagleson (2000:182) where employers sacrifice the well-being of staff and a high turnover in order to maintain service at low cost. These consequences are not discussed and reflected upon by the TAWs:

> Yes, it's true. Then the consumption of employees is a part of the whole strategy. This insight, I do not think anybody has thought about it. You take many calls, and then someone leaves, it becomes like small observations. I do not think you consider the whole picture. (Male TAW)

As the quotation shows, the consequences of the staffing strategy are not discussed and reflected upon by the TAWs. Although many TAWs achieve employment at the call center, this is not for everyone. This is part of the whole strategy, as Degiuli et al. (2007) write: if management wants the support from their workers, promises of employment in the

call center cannot be a myth, although the chances are still limited. This means that the hope for employment is an important means for adaptation to and compliance with the working conditions. This makes visible how the staircase model works together with the search for better working conditions and higher wages as controlling practices.

Exchangeable workers as motivating practice

A client company has the ability to vary the size of its workforce (in this case the call center) by contracting TAWs and the right to send away TAWs singled out as not up to the mark. This ability implies a structural power that allows the call center to 'exert additional control' over TAWs (Degiuli and Kollmeyer 2007:510). This is underlined by a TAW:

> It's a pity, it is just a way of evading employment security. If a person is not good enough it only takes a day to get rid of him. That is the function, what they want to accomplish. Recruiting employees can be done by the employment office. (Male TAW)

The quotation points to an awareness among TAWs of their vulnerable working situation and a questioning of the reasonableness of this staffing strategy. Nevertheless, their expendable situation makes resistance more difficult. The expendable nature of TAWs' assignments is also underlined by a regular employee:

> They are quite easily replaceable, there are many, and it sounds like the call center does not have as strong ties to TAWs.… So it is always: those belonging to the Club and those who do not belong to the Club, those who are employed and those who are not employed. (Male regular)

This ability to send away unwanted TAWs, together with the staircase model, creates a hierarchy involving TAWs and regulars. In addition, TAWs are paid less than regulars; in fact the wage gap could be several thousand Swedish crowns a month. This was described by both TAWs and regulars as unfair because they basically perform the same tasks:

> I think I am as competent as those employed by the call center and I get the worst times and am paid less, although we do exactly the same thing. So the staircase structure, I can go along with it if it is not for long. (Female TAW)

The quote shows differences in the wages and working hours are causing tensions between TAWs and regulars and also feelings of injustice. However, the next quotation reveals an empathetic understanding of TAWs' working situation among regulars:

> TAWs work the worst hours. In the beginning they work evenings and weekends, and then comes the first step on this rewarding staircase, which means that they can join a team and have ordinary working hours. (Male regular)

The quotation illustrates a form of overall cohesion between regulars and TAWs and a questioning of the reasonableness of the differences. It also highlights traces of resistance

among regulars of the unfair treatment of TAWs (compare, e.g., Bain and Taylor 2000). Since most regulars have previously worked as TAWs, both groups show a clear awareness of the impact of differences in conditions. Besides the structural inequality caused by differences embedded in the hierarchical organization, the results of this study also implicate that TAWs are treated as an expendable workforce. As a consequence, feelings of insecurity arise among TAWs and give management effective ways of controlling their workers.

Concluding discussion

This study has focused on the structural use of contracting through TWAs as an extended selection and recruitment procedure in a call center. The aim was to examine how structural, technological, and ideological control is working in this setting and the effects of this control for TAWs' working conditions. Through interviews with TAWs, regular employees, and a manager, all working in this call center, their experience and understandings have highlighted the consequences of these kinds of flexible staffing strategies for workers in such settings. Although the research has been carried out in a single call center, the data still provide valuable insights into the effects of carrying out measures such as these structural and ideological controlling practices.

Consistent with previous research by Degiuli and Kollmeyer (2007), the results show that ideological power is important in adapting the interests of TAWs to those of TWAs and their client companies, in this case the call center. The results also show how ideological power is mixed with structural control in terms of technological control systems and, most importantly, a systematic categorization in a hierarchical structure.

When an employer, as shown in this call center, systematically categorizes people according to the staircase model, a structural inequality between TAWs and regulars is produced and reproduced. This strategy is assumed to motivate TAWs to climb to the next step on the staircase. There is an ongoing struggle among TAWs to prove themselves to be competent and willing in order to be selected as valued workers at the next level as the only available career option in the call center and in the long run to achieve employment in the call center. The construction of this hierarchy in terms of a staircase model indicates a normalization of a flexible staffing strategy where a structural inequality (see Kalleberg et al. 2003) is one of the main motivating and controlling factors for performance.

However, the motives for working in the call center are caused by the shortage of work other than a career in support services. It should, therefore, be seen instead, as suggested by De Jong et al. (2009) and Korpi and Levin (2001), as a career orientation and a stepping stone toward joining the labor market and avoiding the perils of temporary work altogether. As a consequence, feelings of insecurity and an awareness of the precarious nature of their assignment motivate TAWs to enhance their performance and hopefully take a step up the staircase. This implies new understandings of work where job insecurity has become a normal part of working life (Degiuli and Kollmeyer 2007).

The staircase model makes it possible for the call center to achieve a flexible workforce and the possibility of, for a trial period, evaluating which workers are to be selected as valued and/or unique employees at a higher level. Although some TAWs achieve employment at the call center, this is not possible for every TAW. This insecurity about who is to be offered employment is part of the whole strategy and draws attention to TAWs' vulnerable situation in the call center.

In line with Degiuli and Kollmeyer (2007), I argue that the ability to dismiss unwanted TAWs from their assignment gives management in the call center effective ways of disciplining recalcitrant workers. If a TAW causes difficulties or is not performing up to the standard, he or she can be quickly dismissed and replaced with someone new. Although TAWs in Sweden are employed by a TWA and are guaranteed a minimum salary when they have no assignment, they are aware of their vulnerable situation. A TAW who gets dismissed from assignments soon becomes an unpopular employee in the agency and may in the long run be fired. The interviews with these young workers in the call center emphasized an awareness of their vulnerable situation, specifically in their home town, which has high youth unemployment rates.

In sum, the results have shown how structural control in terms of a hierarchical segregation of workers and technological control coexist with ideological control where prospects for better working conditions for hard-working TAWs motivate and control performance.

Finally, there are some restrictions that are important to mention. First, it is difficult to draw any general conclusions from this study as the research was performed in one call center. Nevertheless, the results may be transferred to other organizations with extensive contracting of staff where similar low-skilled, routinized tasks are performed by both regular employees and TAWs. In future research, it would be valuable to include other organizations with extensive contracting of TAWs to further analyze the staffing strategies and hierarchical categorizations in different contexts.

In a broader context of a labor market with high youth unemployment, as in, for example, Sweden and the rest of Europe, further research about young peoples' establishment on the labor market is needed. Especially important is research into workplaces with a mostly young workforce. Future research should also pay more attention to the gendered implications of flexible staffing strategies and labor control.

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