

## **Title**

Explaining the relation between precarious employment and mental well-being. A qualitative study among temporary agency workers.

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## **Abstract**

**BACKGROUND:** From an employee-perspective, temporary agency employment can be considered in two ways. According to the first perspective, agency jobs are associated with job characteristics that adversely affect (mental) health: job insecurity, low wages, a lack of benefits, little training, poorer prospects for the future, high working time flexibility, minimal trade union representation and problematic triadic employment relations. The other perspective underlines that flexibility, learning opportunities and freedom in agency employment enable workers to build the career of their choice, which may positively affect health and well-being.

**OBJECTIVE:** This article aims at interpreting and explaining these conflicting perspectives. In particular, we discuss the role of coping resources (control, support, trust and equity) in the stress pathway between characteristics of temporary agency employment and mental well-being.

**METHODS:** Semi-structured interviews with 12 Belgian temporary agency workers were conducted and analysed from a phenomenological perspective.

**RESULTS:** The results reveal mainly how a lack of coping resources plays a key role in how (precarious) characteristics of temporary agency employment affect employees' mental well-being.

**CONCLUSIONS:** This study illustrates one of the earlier assumed pathways, in which coping resources play an intermediary as well as a moderating role.

**Keywords**

Temporary agency employment, stress process, coping resources, qualitative research, phenomenology

## 1 Introduction

During the last four decades the relationship between employers and employees has changed fundamentally in Western capitalist societies [1,2]. Fewer people are employed according to the characteristics of the 'standard employment relationship' (SER) [3]. Nevertheless, for three reasons the SER can be advanced as a gold standard for 'good employment' [4]. First, in the SER, the inherent power disequilibrium between employers and workers was institutionally corrected by a number of mechanisms: wage-setting procedures, statutory constraints on hiring and firing, collective representation, and employment-related rights and benefits [5]. Second, the SER-employment regime was characterised by the idea of lifelong employment and an Internal Labour Market career, guaranteeing wage increases, social benefits, career-advancement and job security within a long-term relationship between employer and employee [6]. Third, the SER was embedded within an expanding welfare state, offering a social security net beyond the context of employment [6]. However, structural changes occurring in the 1970s have led to the erosion of the traditional SER. In other words, for many employees employment has become more flexible and non-standardised. At a societal level, the result is a 'dual labour market', with a decreasing number of core jobs - being limited to functions of strategic importance for an organisation - and a growing surrounding layer of peripheral jobs offering only temporal and/or partial employment for workers [3,5,7,8].

There are conflicting views on the impact for employees of these non-standardised, peripheral jobs. The majority of scholars are fairly pessimistic and see risks for employee well-being [9–17]. In the 'dual labour market', peripheral jobs are often precarious, for example in terms of employment instability (e.g. temporary employment), low material rewards (e.g. low income, lack of benefits), erosion of workers' rights and social protection, non-standardised working time arrangements (e.g. unpredictable schedules, flexible or irregular working hours), limited training opportunities, lack of possibilities for employee representation (e.g. trade union representation) and imbalanced interpersonal power relations with employers and colleagues [18–25]. These more negative employment experiences cause poorer employee well-being [14]. By contrast, other authors argue that

non-standardization may also bring benefits for employees: more freedom, flexibility, and opportunities for learning and acquiring experience in different jobs and organizations. Such employment experiences could have a positive impact on well-being [26–28].

Our general aim is to discuss these conflicting views from the specific experiences of temporary agency workers. The primary focus is on the stress pathway between temporary work agency (TWA) employment and mental well-being. Agency work is of particular relevance in this context for two reasons. First, an increasing number of organizations use TWA employment as an important strategy for achieving flexibility among their periphery workforce [29]. Moreover, the current 'flexicurity discourse' in Europe suggests that agency employment will gain even more importance in the future. The flexicurity model refers to easy hiring and firing regulation, providing flexibility for employers, in combination with training opportunities to increase job mobility and high unemployment benefits providing security for employees. Second, TWA employment presents a unique case of non-standardisation because of the tripartite employment relationship, which could make TWA employees more vulnerable and the relationship with employee well-being complex [9,12].

Evidence on the relationship between TWA employment and well-being is inconclusive [26,27,30]. An explanation for these inconclusive findings may be related to the psychosocial mechanisms provoked by positive or negative experiences related to TWA employment. These psychosocial mechanisms can be considered as possible pathways linking TWA employment - and more generally precarious employment situations - to mental well-being.

In this paper, the stress pathway is explored in a qualitative way, by means of an interview study among Flemish agency workers. We believe that our qualitative interview study adds important insights to those derived from earlier and mostly quantitative evidence. In-depth interviews may help to understand the process behind the impact of TWA employment on mental well-being. From the qualitative studies on TWA employment, only those of Krausz and Brandwein [10] and Rogers [31] paid explicit attention to the stress pathway between TWA employment and well-being. These studies provided us with interesting evidence on the perceptions of TWA employees about their employment, by addressing issues related to alienation (e.g. powerlessness and lack of support). The focus of our

study is on the role played by different coping resources (control, support, trust and equity) in the stress process that have been advanced by social stress theorists [32–34]. We focus on coping resources since they are important for the way employees deal with stressful employment situations.

Another justification for this study can be found in the fact that most earlier studies have been conducted in liberal market economies (e.g. the USA, Canada, New-Zealand) and in Southern Europe (e.g. Spain, Italy) [12,35–39]. We provide evidence from a different context, namely Belgium, a continental and more regulated market economy, which implies important differences in regulations and laws, certainly in comparison with liberal market economies [40].

The structure of this paper is as follows: First, we provide an overview of the characteristics of the TWA sector in Belgium and its regulatory environment. Second, we present the different coping resources that are analysed, fitted in the theoretical framework of the stress process. Then, we review what is already known about TWA employment in relation to the coping resources. Third, the methodology used in this study is outlined. Finally, the findings of our qualitative, empirical research are described and discussed in relation to the coping resources, and conclusions are drawn from our analyses.

## **2 TWA employment in Belgium and its regulatory environment**

TWA employment is based on a tripartite employment relationship. It concerns temporary work performed by an employee, on behalf of a TWA (the 'de jure' employer), for a third party, which is the client-user (the 'de facto' employer). In Belgium, 540,434 workers (including students with a part-time job) were employed as TWA employees in 2012, for at least one day. On a daily basis, 2.22% of the total workforce was employed by TWAs [41]. TWA employment is highly regulated in Belgium compared to many other countries. First, TWA employment is conceived as a specific economic sector with its own collective negotiations and agreements, and only licensed TWAs are permitted to operate on the market. Second, TWA employment is allowed only in a limited number of situations: 1) to replace a permanent employee whose employment contract is temporarily suspended (e.g. illness, holiday) or terminated (e.g. dismissal, breach of contract), 2) in case of a temporary increase in the amount of work, 3) to perform exceptional work (e.g. a periodic maintenance), 4) as part of an

active labour market programme, and 5) as a selection procedure prior to the direct recruitment of new employees [42]. In all these cases, TWA contracts are of limited duration. In most cases they are weekly contracts and to a lesser extent monthly contracts. Day contracts were relatively common at the time of data collection, but recently stricter rules have been introduced. The exclusively temporary nature of the contracts is an important difference with some other countries. For example, in Sweden and Germany TWA employees may have open-ended contracts with the agency [43]. Third, wages, benefits and working hour regulations of the TWA employees are mandated to be equal to those of workers with an open-ended contract, performing the same job in the company. Fourth, the client-user is obliged to appoint someone who is responsible for the introduction of each new TWA employee in the company. Finally, the law states that client-users have to bear the costs for the necessary company uniforms and personal protective equipment [42]. In sum, Belgian regulation promotes the equal treatment of TWA employees and permanent employees and tries to protect the health and safety of TWA employees [40].

### **3 Coping resources and TWA employment**

Tompa and Scott-Marshall [23] argue that precarious work affects health and well-being primarily because of the stress it causes workers. In this study, we focus on how TWA employment can affect mental well-being. Mental well-being is defined as "the presence of positive emotions and moods (e.g. contentment, happiness), the absence of negative emotions (e.g. depression, anxiety), satisfaction with life, fulfilment and positive functioning" [44].

This stress pathway relates job characteristics to employee well-being. A job can be seen as an important social position, placing an individual in the social structure. Moreover, a job - as a set of work characteristics - exposes workers differentially to stressors. Stressors give rise to strain or instead may activate individuals [45–47]. Strain often follows from an imbalance between demanding exposures and counterbalancing job characteristics offering control over the (work) environment or resources to deal with the demands related to the job. In the case of strain, the worker is unable to address the demands [23,48]. Activation, on the other hand, for example in the form of learning or motivation, occurs when individuals perceive to have sufficient control or resources to deal with

demands, for example when high demands are combined with high control or other resources [48]. A social (external) resource that helps to deal with demands in the context of work is social support [33,34]. However, resources can also be internal to the individual. Good examples of such personal coping resources are sense of control, self-esteem, meaning and trust [32,34,49]. These coping resources may intervene in the stress process in different ways. First, they may help or hinder individuals to deal with stressors: For example, social support may reduce the negative impact of a stressor, or powerlessness may increase this impact. Second, coping resources may directly affect employee well-being, for example high self-esteem has a positive effect on mental well-being [46,50]. The coping resources are associated with coping strategies and coping styles. More specifically coping resources may affect the choice and/or the efficacy of the coping strategies and styles that people use in response to stressors [45,46,51].

Coping strategies are behavioural and/or cognitive endeavours that play a role when managing specific situational demands that are perceived as taxing or exceeding one's ability to adapt [46]. They can be either problem-focussed or emotion-focused [46,51]. Coping styles are more general habitual preferences for approaching problems (e.g. withdraw or approach, become active or remain passive) [46].

Personal coping resources, coping strategies and coping styles are all part of the 'self', while social coping resources are externally situated. Also, the possession of personal and social coping resources and the use of particular coping strategies and styles are socially patterned in ways that may leave members of disadvantaged groups more vulnerable to the harmful effects of stress on health and well-being. Confronted with similar levels of stressors, women, the elderly, the unmarried and those of lower socioeconomic status are assumed to encounter a stronger negative influence on their health and well-being than their higher-status counterparts [46].

We conceive the stress process as cyclical: stressors can cause strain or activation, which in turn feeds the subsequent experience of stressors and the availability of coping resources, and promotes specific coping strategies and styles in future situations.

Since coping resources are important in the way we deal with stressful employment situations, we aim to apply the role of coping resources in the above-outlined stress model to the link between TWA employment and mental wellbeing. In the results section we report how coping resources emerged in the discourses of TWA employees. From the literature on TWA and other forms of non-standardised employment, the following coping resources appear to be of particular interest: sense of control (or its opposite: powerlessness), support (or social isolation), trust (or mistrust) and equity (or inequity).

First, *powerlessness* or *lack of control* concerns the inability to achieve personal objectives. Conversely, control is the extent to which people see themselves as being in control of the forces that affect their lives [32,33,45,52]. Some studies have highlighted feelings of powerlessness among TWA employees: They report feelings of powerlessness, learned helplessness, low personal control, uselessness, easy disposability, anxiousness and difficulties to plan beyond the immediate future because of job insecurity, leading to dissatisfaction [10,13,38,39,53]. Furthermore, TWA employees often experience difficulties in standing up for their rights [39], and they are less likely to have a say at work [31,54]. This problem is exacerbated because TWA employees see few possibilities to change the situation: raising their voice may lead to job loss. Instead, they feel pressured to comply with the employer's demands because they want to obtain a permanent job. For example, in an effort to get a permanent contract, TWA employees had skipped breaks, accepted dull and dangerous tasks, or even worked through illnesses and injuries [13,31,55]. Similarly, they refrained from joining a trade union since this may give a negative impression to the employer [55]. Moreover, even when they are unionized, TWA employees may feel that they are outside the shop stewards' protection [56]. On the other hand, some studies are highlighting that TWA employment also provides workers with control over their career. Experienced professionals in the study by Kirkpatrick and Hoque [57] reported that they use agency employment to enhance their upward mobility. In their opinion, TWA employment provided them with skills and experiences perceived as useful for obtaining promotion. Also positive experiences such as freedom, flexibility and control over time [28], were reported as big advantages by some workers in the study of Clarke et al. [13]. Guest [28] argues that the key point is that these 'free workers' seek, rather than avoid, flexible employment contracts and negotiate the contracts that serve them best. In this way they have power and control over their careers.



Second, the availability of *social support* concerns access to useful aid provided by individuals, groups or organisations in dealing with life's vicissitudes [33,34]. It is the sense of being cared for and loved, esteemed and valued as a person, and being part of a network of communication and obligation [32]. In contrast, *social isolation* refers to detachment from personal relationships [32]. Some studies have reported on the lack of support and social isolation among TWA employees. TWA employees often feel treated differently, as outsiders, not as 'real members' of the organisation where they work [31,38,39,56,57]. This exclusion is expressed in mechanisms of discrimination (e.g. not being invited for social events). Such experiences affect the morale of employees [31,38,39,56], or lead to feelings of depression because of the way they are treated by permanent employees [56]. Moreover, isolation goes beyond the shop floor. In the qualitative study by Clarke et al. [13], many temporary workers stated that they hesitated to make plans with friends during times they might end up having to work. Others felt too exhausted to maintain social relations or did not have the financial means to be able to go out. Such experiences are all the more painful, because it is argued that it is precisely such support that is very important to keep precarious employment situations sustainable from a worker health perspective [13].

Third, *mistrust* concerns a lack of confidence in other people arising from suspicion. It is based on a belief that people are out for their own good and will exploit or victimise you in the pursuit of their own goals [32,34,49]. Byoung-Hoon and Frenkel [56] found that TWA employees are sometimes targets of discrimination by union representatives, resulting in low trust in the trade union as an advocate of their interests. Further, mistrust towards employers can appear as a consequence of being blamed undeservedly for things going wrong. This is a situation that appears to happen more frequently in TWA employees [31,57].

Finally, *inequity* (feelings of *unfairness* and *injustice*) is related to the unequal distribution of social resources. Inequity occurs from the moment that these social inequalities are perceived as illegitimate [32]. Social comparison and social exchange theories hypothesize that employees' reactions are monitored by perceptions of fairness: employees compare the outcomes they receive with the outcomes received by referent others [27]. Inequity can also point at feelings of non-reciprocity in interpersonal relations [32]. This has often been formulated in psychological contract

terms. The psychological contract appears as a set of reciprocal expectations held by employees concerning their obligations and their entitlements [27,58]. Concerning 'inequity', studies indicate that TWA employees receive less pay, less benefits and less social protection than permanent workers [11,12,25,38,56,57]. This causes feelings of discrimination and unfairness among TWA employees [11,12,38,54,56,57,59], and subsequently affects well-being. Furthermore, a lot of studies point out that TWA employees are given less training and career opportunities than permanent workers [12,38,39,56,57], which can cause dissatisfaction [59,60].

## **4 Methods**

### *4.1 Sample*

The population of this study consists of adult persons from Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium) who are or have been employed in TWA employment during the two years before the interview (excluding student workers). We searched for information-rich cases with substantial experience with TWA employment: we selected respondents who worked through TWA employment for more than a year, and/or persons who had at least four different TWA jobs. Moreover, we took into account some socio-demographic characteristics to ensure diversity in the sample and to explore the unequal distribution of risks among TWA employees. These characteristics can be found in Table 1.

The workers were selected using several partners. The first partners are the general practitioners of an NGO offering primary health care in working class neighbourhoods. Their regularly subscribed patient population consists of both healthy and unhealthy persons. The medical doctors provided some anonymous data from their patients, enabling the researchers to select profiles corresponding to the criteria of this study. Subsequently, the general practitioners asked these individuals to participate in the study and to give consent for being contacted by the researchers. Our second partner was the socialist trade union. Here, the trade union staff recruited from their union members based on the criteria forwarded by the researchers. Furthermore, the trade union had also recently collected anonymous testimonials from agency workers. After the principal researcher had

selected information-rich cases fitting the criteria, the trade union staff contacted these people asking for their willingness to participate in the study. A final way of sampling through the trade union was accomplished by sending a call for an interview about TWA employment to the TWA employees of a certain region in Belgium (Antwerp). Our third partner was an organisation helping hard-to-employ people with their job search. Also in this case, the staff selected workers based on criteria forwarded by the researchers. The final number of interviews with TWA employees depended on the criterion of saturation of information. Ultimately, 12 workers were interviewed.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

#### 4.2 *Analytical procedure*

A phenomenological perspective was applied when analysing the data. The foundational question in phenomenology is "what is the meaning, structure and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?" [61]. As a consequence, in phenomenology the focus lies on exploring how human beings make sense of experiences and transform experiences into consciousness, both individually and as a shared meaning [61]. A phenomenological perspective thus pays attention to the perceptions and feelings of people associated with what they experience, not only to mere observations of the experience itself [62,63]. In line with the requirements of this approach, data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews using a topic list [61].

The list consisted of topics about the quality of employment (e.g. stability, income, rights, training, employment relations, trade union representation), and was completed with topics about work-related mental health and well-being. It was used as a checklist throughout the interviews. To address the different topics, the interviewer focused on two accounts: (1) the life course perspective, with emphasis on the employment history of the employee, and (2) the structure of a typical working day. These two accounts were used to make the interview appear as a natural conversation. Throughout the accounts, the interviewer probed into the various topics related to TWA employment and the link with mental well-being. In that manner perceptions, opinions and feelings of interviewees about the various topics raised were illuminated. During some of the interviews, a partner or family

member was present, and sometimes intervened in the conversation. When referred to things mentioned by third people, this is explicitly stated in the results section. The interviews were conducted in the period between April 2012 and April 2013. The length of the interviews varied between 48 and 160 minutes. Since the language used for the interviews was Dutch, all quotes in this article are translations.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Then, the transcripts were read-through several times in order to obtain an overview. Subsequently, open, axial and selective coding was performed. The transcripts were coded in themes in two different ways. First, thematic codes were given to text fragments. These codes were inspired by aspects of the quality of employment. We applied thematic codes such as 'income', 'knowledge about rights', 'working time flexibility', etc. Secondly, codes referring to experiences of workers, related to components of the stress process, were added (e.g. 'the experience of freedom', 'powerlessness'). Therefore, a text fragment could be coded both with thematic codes and experience-related codes, allowing linkages between experiences and aspects of precarious employment. Based on these codes, a coding tree was created. As an additional means of validation, several researchers coded some randomly selected interviews. The coding trees and coded text fragments were compared while aiming for a consensus about the interpretations and codes between the researchers (investigator triangulation). Interviewing, coding and recoding continued until the information saturation level was reached. In a next step, queries (linkages between different codes) were made to further categorise the acquired information and to make linkages between codes. This procedure assured an in-depth, exhaustive description of the phenomenological experience of TWA employment [62].

## **5 Findings**

The results of our analyses are presented within the theoretical framework of the stress process, using the most important social and personal coping resources emerging from the literature on TWA - employment and well-being. Subsequently powerlessness, lack of support, mistrust and inequity are discussed.

Based on some evidence in the literature and especially our own interview data, we assume that coping resources do not only moderate, but also intermediate the relation between TWA employment and mental well-being (as illustrated in Figure 1). In the results, we show how coping resources, first of all, moderate the relation between stressors/demands (in this case experiences related to TWA employment) and strain/activation, consequently having an impact on mental well-being. Secondly, we also discuss the intermediary role of coping resources, i.e. how strain/activation caused by experiences related to TWA employment affects workers' coping resources, which in turn may have an impact on well-being outcomes. An example of moderation is seen in TWA employees experiencing a general feeling of powerlessness: they appear to have more difficulties in coping with some precarious experiences related to TWA employment. With the intermediary role, we mean for example that strain caused by precarious TWA experiences can raise feelings of powerlessness, which subsequently has an impact on mental well-being. Hereafter, we expand on both the moderating and intermediating role of coping resources in the relation between TWA employment and mental well-being.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

### *5.1 Powerlessness*

A group of workers indicated that agency work gave them a lot of freedom. They did not feel obliged to commit themselves to a company and they could change jobs whenever they want. Jack, a 54-year old high-skilled accountant, even mentioned that agency work had given him the opportunity to revitalise his career, since he was in a rut because of his previous, permanent job. Furthermore, agency work gave him the opportunity to develop new skills and gain experience. This was endorsed by another temporary worker, Harry, who was an independent entrepreneur in the past. He indicated that agency work gave him the chance to learn new things from other entrepreneurs by working for them as a TWA employee. In the following quote, Jack presents his positive experiences as a TWA employee:

“Actually, I was stuck in my job. They still used old accounting software, and that was the only job I knew. Say I stayed there for another 10 years and say then they fired me, I could’ve got a nice severance pay, but I would probably never have found another real job. While now, I’ve met interesting people and interesting ways of working. By doing different agency jobs, I’ve learned how different companies work.”

Also, agency work allowed Jack the freedom to take a break in his career whenever he wanted: 'When a job is finished, you can just say “Now, I’m going to lie in a hammock for three months” [laughs].’ Some workers saw agency work as an adventure: new environments, new people, new methods, etc. For them, agency work was a challenge or a way to get to know something new. One of them had an 'adventurous lifestyle': she worked for example for short periods, and went on holiday for a couple of months afterwards. TWA employment gave her the opportunity to choose this way of life. Another interviewee indicated that agency work offered him the chance to earn some extra money while this was not a financial necessity for him. Consequently, TWA employment gave him the feeling of doing something useful instead of sitting at home.

Feelings of freedom and having learning opportunities in TWA employment were mainly experienced by higher qualified employees, who voluntarily chose TWA employment. Literature indicates that well-being among TWA employees is conditional upon volition [64–66]. Our study shows that these TWA workers used the temporary and flexible character of TWA employment, which is perceived as a burden for many other TWA employees, to build the career of their choice. Aspects of precarious employment (e.g. instability) were altered into means helping them to (re)gain control over their careers. Consequently, the fact that they had control over the choices that they made, made them feel good about their employment situation. Therefore, a voluntary choice for TWA employment can be seen as a manifestation of having control over one's career.

However, powerlessness was the more common feeling expressed in our interviews. This feeling was raised in many situations. Many TWA employees were employed in agency work because they assumed it was the only kind of work they could get. They accepted agency work as their fate. Young workers had the impression that companies only wanted to recruit them in TWA contracts since they

were 'too inexperienced'. Older temps mentioned that working through TWA agencies was the only way to get a job, since companies were reluctant to contract them because of being too expensive as a regular worker. For both groups, this caused a lot of frustration. Since many TWA employees had to take care of themselves or their family, income was very important for them. Mia, a single woman who mostly worked as a shop assistant, mentioned: 'In the end, this was the way I saw it: I needed to take care of my bills, so I took on every job I could get.' Some older workers, such as Olivia, who mostly worked as a clerk, were happy that TWA employment existed, because they felt this was their only resource: 'I cling to my agency job. I'm so happy it exists, because if it weren't for this, I probably wouldn't have found a job anymore.' These are examples of workers who did not have control over their career prospects, because of a lack of skills and/or an accumulation of negative experiences in finding a permanent job. It made them feel uncertain and powerless.

Some employees perceived agency work as a gateway into permanent employment. An employee mentioned that it was difficult to stay in TWA employment, since after a while the companies he worked for had almost always the intention to offer him an open-ended contract. However, this experience was rather rare. Many of the interviewees were already in a number of TWA jobs. In the beginning, they hoped to find permanent employment through accepting temporary jobs. However, after a while, many of them realised that this was not likely to happen, making them think of themselves as 'disposable workers'. Some TWA employees worked non-stop in weekly contracts in the same company for several years. For fear of social inspections - it was an illegal practice - the organisation stopped the employment relationship. This was a very frustrating experience for the respondents, certainly because they were working hard all the time in order to get an open-ended contract. Some companies indicated that these workers can come back after a while, again as TWA employees, just to get around the regulation obliging the company to offer a permanent contract to someone who is doing a good job. An, a single 50-year old woman who was a victim of this malpractice, called it 'human trafficking'. Some TWA employees were already told by other colleagues at their first day of work that they would never get an open-ended contract:

“Your first day on the job, co-workers tell you “I’ve been here three years as an agency worker” or “I’ve been an agency worker for seven years, they’re never going to give you a permanent contract”. The company claims to hire people because the workload has temporarily increased. That’s when I think “Oh no, here we go again”. It’s just so frustrating.”

(An)

“The guy who had to train me asked me where I was from. “The temporary agency,” I told him, “They told me I’d get a permanent contract after nine months.” Then he started laughing and I asked him why. “Look at the Moroccan guy over there,” he said, “He’s been an agency worker here for two years...” That’s when I thought: “Ouch, they are not only lying about the wages, they are lying about the nine months as well [the client-company lied already about the wage as well, before Patrick started working].” (Patrick)

However, many TWA employees still hoped to be the exception and put themselves out for the company. Such experiences led to frustration, discouragement and hopelessness, as Emma, a high-skilled, young, single mother who never found a job fitting her diploma, stated:

“You feel like you’re being toyed with and things are out of your control. You have to do temporary work in order to survive... Sometimes it does happen that you feel good in a company and you want to stay there and build a career, but [cynical laugh] after a while you don’t know what to think anymore... You’re put aside so easily, while maybe the job could’ve been a step up for you.”

This quote illustrates that Emma expected long-term employment prospects from her employer. Since she did not get this, she felt powerless over her future employment situation.

The inability to build a stable life, because of job insecurity, was also raised as a big disadvantage. Doing TWA jobs hampered the life-planning of TWA employees in the long run, since they had the feeling that they did not have the power to control their lives. The future presented itself as a never-ending-story of temporary jobs. Some quotes illustrate these frustrations:



“You constantly have to go from one agency to the other, and companies fire you one after the other. Of course you regret it happening again, because in every new company you have to prove yourself to your co-workers, again. You have to adapt to their mentality and learn the ropes. It does weigh on you. At least, that’s how we [the parents] experience it. When he comes home you immediately know how things went today. Sometimes it’s hard, because every time we have to comfort him and tell him “It’s not your fault, you’re trying your best, that’s all you can do.” And every time a job ends it starts all over again. After a while, it’s really tiresome that you can’t seem to get a permanent contract. So you continue working for agencies and every time you know the job is going to finish in a couple of weeks... In this situation, it’s not easy to really make something of your life.” (Jason's father)

“If you’re working with contracts that are renewed on a weekly basis, it really feels like you’re living from day to day. You never know when it’s going to end, or rather, when you’re going to be ‘relieved’ from this situation and get a permanent contract. There’s never any certainty at all.” (Jason)

Next, some workers felt powerless since they did not receive the rights and benefits to which they were entitled. Many people did not dare to claim their rights, because they were afraid of losing their jobs. The partner of Marc, a blue-collar worker in his forties, mentioned the following:

“They tell you to stand up for yourself, but when you start complaining about this or that, you won’t find a job anymore. I know it sounds strange, but either you have to be obedient, or you have to know your way with words.”

Some TWA employees also experienced how the lack of control over continuing their job pushed them to go to work while ill. They went to work ill because they were afraid of not being allowed to return after sick leave, which potentially affected their health in a negative way. Furthermore, sometimes TWAs pushed ill employees to quickly restart work.

While sickness presenteeism might be considered as an implicit case of inability to claim statutory rights, sometimes social rights or standards were deprived in a more abusive manner. An

example is changing week-contracts into day-contracts. Day contracts allow agencies only to pay for the days actually worked and not for the sickness days. Another common practice is sending the contracts to the employee too late, so they can only be signed after the work is performed. Some workers mentioned their employers were 'forgetting' to put a date on the contracts, which made abuses easier, but more difficult to prove. However, protest was not an option for a lot of the employees, as An said:

“If you speak up and complain about something, they [TWA staff] put this in the computer system and you’re not going to get any job offers anymore... This is something I can’t afford. This is something a lot of people can’t afford.”

Eventually, the TWA employee's powerlessness was expressed on the shop-floor in several ways (e.g. TWA employees accepted flexible and overtime hours because they hoped to get a permanent contract, or because they were scared to lose their current job). Also, in a lot of companies, permanent employees had authority over the work of agency workers. They were often instructed to keep an eye on the TWA employees. This meant that permanent colleagues had a certain power over the temp: they could make sure temps’ contracts were not extended. The story of Jason, a young blue-collar worker in search of his first permanent job, offers a good example: after a dispute with a permanent worker, the permanent worker lied to their superior:

“Had this permanent colleague gone up to tell the boss that he had seen me using my cell phone, I would’ve been fired immediately, on the spot. Just because I put him in his place!”

## 5.2 *Lack of support*

In the case of TWA employees, four groups of significant others can be regarded as particularly important for assuring social support: family and friends, employers (TWAs and client-companies), co-workers and customers.

First, many TWA employees felt misunderstood, since they had the impression that society as a whole and sometimes even family and friends thought of them as lazy or incompetent people. As Marc's partner stated:

“Not only Marc, but the whole family is suffering under the situation. This can really drag a family down. That’s why I tell people not to approach Marc by saying “Are you unemployed again?” or “He doesn’t want to work.” Apparently, people don’t understand the situation.”

However, Marc stressed that his partner played a crucial role in coping with the many job interruptions that he encountered:

“It feels good to get some help [his partner is helping him a lot in his search for work]. I get a lot of support from my partner, which really means a lot to me.”

For others, coping was sometimes very difficult since they did not have a family to rely on. Emma, for example, could not accept jobs that suited her skills since these jobs were mostly characterised by flexible working hours. If she had a family that could support her by looking after her little daughter while she was working, finding a better job would be easier. Even more, her family blamed her for not finding a good job:

“You have a good degree, don’t you? That should get you a job.” People’s criticisms get you even more depressed, and that’s how you become isolated a little.

Important to note is that financial uncertainty, caused by many job interruptions, also had an impact on the social network a worker could rely on:

“Going away for the weekend? No. Having a drink in the pub with some friends? No. I’ve had to turn down a lot... People do want you there with them, but you don’t want to have to explain to them that this month is a bit of a financial struggle. So, you say you have another appointment. A little white lie... But this is how you become isolated and lonely and in the end it gets you ill.” (An)

Second, TWA employees often lacked support from their employers. The interviews revealed complaints about the service offered by certain employment agencies. Many employees claimed that they were often treated disrespectfully by staff members. An reported how the staff of some agencies dealt with her: 'As soon as you open the door, some of them even shout: “Nooooo, no vacancies!”'. It’s

so frustrating... They act like you don't even exist.' Also Mia had very negative experiences with an agency consultant:

“I told her “I have proof that I'm ill, but I haven't received my pay.” She answered: “As long as I receive my pay at the end of the months, things are fine!” Seriously, I could've punched her in the face.”

Third, for all employees, social relations with (permanent) co-workers are very important. For Olivia, the support she received from her permanent colleague gave her a boost:

“I had a permanent colleague who I could fall back on if I had a question. Because when you start working somewhere, there are always things, which are unclear. Every time it's either sink or swim. And she was there to help me whenever I got stuck.”

However, many TWA employees mentioned that they were treated disrespectfully by permanent co-workers. They reported that some permanent workers looked down on the TWA employees and that they sometimes blamed the TWA employee when a mistake was made by someone else. The disrespectful attitude of some permanent workers is illustrated in the following quote, where An explained why permanent workers were often frustrated too:

“They're thinking, “Oh no, not another agency worker... Oh no, now I have to explain things all over again!””, which really doesn't feel nice. So they give you only half an explanation or none at all.”

Furthermore, temps were not always accepted as 'real members' of the staff (e.g. not being invited to social activities). This reinforced the feeling of being a second-class worker among TWA employees. Sometimes it was mentioned literally that they were 'just a temp' when TWA employees were turned down:

“You're not a full part of the team, not like the permanent employees are. There are colleagues who don't mind, but there are also those who think you're inferior. They think of you as being ‘only a temporary worker’. When you ask them something, they often tell you “There are things you don't have to know, you're just a temp”. ” (Mia)

Moreover, the accounts of our respondents seemed to confirm the observation that union representatives were not or less engaged with the issues faced by TWA employees:

“In my previous company you could talk to trade union representatives. But they always said “We can’t really help you. We can get information, but we can’t really do anything for you.” So you’re paying a trade union, but you get nothing in return. You’re the odd man out, because you don’t belong to any group really.” (An)

Finally, support of customers was also an important source of support for some employees. Mia felt really encouraged in doing one of her TWA jobs because of the reactions of customers in the shop:

“From the beginning, customers told my boss: “You should keep her, because she’s good! She’s friendly, she’s polite, she likes to joke, she’s a hard worker...” Yeah, they really loved me!”

### 5.3 *Mistrust*

Many TWA employees had negative experiences with the staff of some agencies, bosses of client-companies and the trade unions, which made them mistrusting.

A majority of the TWA employees complained that the TWA staff were not honest. Often, promises about permanent contracts at the client-company were made. However, most of the time agencies did not keep their promises regarding permanent contracts. This can be seen as a violation of the psychological contract between employer and employee, as Marc stated: 'The last few years I've been drowning... I have to adjust all the time. They make you promises but usually don't keep them.' Moreover, TWAs were not always honest about payments:

“Every time I asked for information, I got another explanation. So I said to myself "This can't be true." They were lying all the time, about holiday pay and everything.” (Harry)

Due to many bad experiences, many agency workers chose to work only with a couple of TWAs that had staff whom they considered trustworthy:

“When it comes to experience and politeness, [name of a TWA] and [name of a TWA] are really good. The staff really cares about you and they really do want to find a job for you. They tell you, "If we find anything, we'll call you". I can trust these people.” (An)

Jack, who worked for a TWA specialising in financial sector employment, had very positive experiences, which gave him a lot of confidence in the staff of that TWA:

“For example, they re-did the layout of my CV, and the result was really much better than before. I have no idea how they introduced me to companies... But you're their product, aren't you, so they're nice to you, and they know how to sell you. About their service, no complaints here!”

Furthermore, mistrust emerged when TWA employees felt exploited by the client-companies. TWA employees accepted, for example, flexible hours and overtime work because they hoped to get a permanent contract, while in the end their contract was not extended.

Also confidence in the extent that trade unions will defend them was sometimes absent among TWA employees:

“A trade union, what's that? [sarcastically] I have my doubts about the unions. As I said before, they hire you for three years, then fire you, and then re-hire you for another three years... Where are the unions when you need them?” (An)

Furthermore, mistrusting individuals might not seek social support when in need, may reject offers of support, and may be uncomfortable with any support that is given [32]. In the following quote, An mentioned disconnecting herself from the other workers - leading to social isolation - just to protect her feelings, which can be seen as her strategy to cope with the unpleasant experiences she had earlier:

“It goes like this: I keep my head down and I work, work, work, then “RING!”, the bell goes, and then back to work, work, work. Why? I try to keep to myself, because I'm afraid to commit. I'm there to work, and that's it. But that's not who I am, so I don't feel comfortable there.”

#### 5.4 *Inequity*

Feelings of unfairness and injustice were common among TWA employees, certainly if they compared their situation with that of permanent colleagues.

In terms of income and other material rewards, TWA employees are often disadvantaged. According to Belgian law, TWA employees must receive the same income and extra benefits compared to a starting permanent employee. Nevertheless, a lot of TWA employees assert receiving a lower wage and fewer rewards than permanent employees. Some companies try to skirt the rules by only offering those rights after a certain seniority level is reached. If this is the case, TWA employees can never get to the rewards a lot of their permanent colleagues are entitled to. Furthermore, agencies exploited the workers' ignorance about their rights, for example by not paying statutory holidays. Some agency workers also indicated that they received no or little personal protective equipment, or that they had to pay a deposit for it, while this equipment must be provided by the employer. This is illegal and can place the health and safety of agency workers in danger, certainly given the fact that a lot of these people have little experience in their jobs (see Underhill & Quinlan [9]). In all these examples feelings of unfairness emerged among TWA employees, since they did not receive what they were entitled to.

Also, many client-companies gave extra presents/bonuses to their permanent employees only and not to the TWA employees. This caused feelings of injustice and inferiority among TWA employees. Companies that treated TWA employees equally were greatly respected by the TWA employees:

“I can't say I was excluded from anything in that company. TWA employees received New Year's presents just like everyone else. At the end of the year they gave us some bottles of wine, including the TWA employees. Once there was some occasion, and we all received a suitcase as a present. Everyone did! They didn't treat TWA employees any differently.” (An)

Furthermore, complaints concerning rights and social protection were mentioned. Being disadvantaged with regard to social security entitlements (e.g. unemployment benefits), was an important issue raised. While having worked almost the whole year, having some days without being

registered as a paid worker (because of unpaid vacation or short periods of unemployment), can have implications for benefit levels and access to entitlements in the public social security system (which is still predominantly geared towards full-time permanent employment). This is an often-mentioned problem among the agency workers. Not being eligible to parental leave is a good example. Since this entitlement is only accessible when having worked a whole year for a single employer, a lot of TWA employees do not qualify for this entitlement. Other disadvantages mentioned are not being entitled to additional holidays based on seniority and not having the right to a paid career interruption (only after working 2 years for the same employer). Such disadvantages caused frustration, since the TWA employees felt that they worked hard without being appropriately rewarded. These feelings of frustration can be described as a situation of non-reciprocity. Non-reciprocity emerges from an unbalanced interchange between efforts (working as hard or harder than permanent employees) and favours (not getting similar employment-related rewards as the permanent employees). In some cases it caused bitterness, cynicism or indifference.

Feelings of non-reciprocity occurred also as a consequence of other experiences: some workers felt exploited by their employers because of the flexibility that was asked from them. Specifically, taking holidays seemed to be a problem for many TWA employees (especially for those working for short periods in different companies). It was often the case that permanent employees could choose their holidays first. Mia complained that she did not get something in return for her willingness to accommodate others:

Permanent employees got everything they wanted, but the agency workers... Once, I asked them for half a day off because I really needed it, and they said "No, permanent workers have priority."

Also other TWA employees had the impression that they did not receive recognition for their work, and even felt betrayed or used if they were dismissed:

"It made me feel sort of inferior... You know you're pretty capable and employers have always been satisfied with my work. I'm rarely ill – the last 16 years I haven't been ill for two



weeks. So everywhere I go people are satisfied and I can go back and look everyone in the eye... But then, when they mess with you like that, you grow tired... You bite people's heads off, you're acting out at home... No steady job, no security, no nothing, it doesn't do you well." (Patrick)

"Crying and crying, or biting people's heads off. Feeling insecure... You feel like you're doing your best, you're motivated, and again they only want you as a temp. I started out really positively, but after three months I felt like I was a disposable product: "You've served your use, so now you can go." There is no appreciation or gratitude... Was I worth that little to them?" (Mia)

In general, it seems that the agency workers we interviewed received few opportunities to develop their skills. This issue was often related to the content of their work tasks. Some interviewees claimed that temps were often doing the dull, tough or dirty jobs, while the better jobs were reserved for the permanent employees. This strengthened feelings of injustice among TWA employees:

"These kinds of jobs were always given to the agency workers – though not always the same ones. There were boxes which came in from China on pallet boards which had mould because they were wet. Now, this is something that can happen, but it happened all the time... And we were the ones who had to move those boxes onto other pallets. We were supposed to wear a mask against the bacteria, but most of us didn't bother." (Patrick)

In the following quote, Patrick, a blue-collar worker in his forties with a family, reported that he was not allowed to do the job that suited his capacities because he was a TWA employee. This is an example of status-inconsistency that caused feelings of injustice:

"I worked there for six weeks. I have a certificate saying I can drive all kinds of machines. Each team had maybe 20 fork-lift trucks but I didn't get to spend a single day on one... I always had to stack and do little silly jobs like unloading trucks and cleaning."

The triangular employment relationship was also considered as a source of difficulties: responsibilities (e.g. giving a day-off) were passed on from the TWA to the client-user and vice versa,

resulting in harm for the employee (e.g. not getting a day-off). This example of role ambiguity, an intra-role conflict between expectations of two role-senders (as already remarked by Krausz et al. [65]) caused feelings of injustice among TWA employees.

Eventually, performing TWA employment has some indirect consequences too. An issue clearly leading to feelings of injustice among agency workers were the difficulties experienced in trying to obtain a loan from the bank to buy a house or a car. This was perceived as a clear barrier in planning their lives. Angela, who felt financially responsible for her unemployed partner and her newborn baby, managed to get a loan, but complained that she was not entitled to insurance for loss of income (an insurance paid by the government that helps people with paying their mortgage in case of unemployment):

“They won’t insure me, while this is what I really need because I don’t have a permanent job. It’s just me and I don’t have a husband who makes money. So if I lose my job...”

## **6 Conclusion**

Our results illustrate how work-related experiences of TWA employees can affect their coping resources. Negative influences were most common: e.g. powerlessness because of not finding permanent employment, isolation because of being socially excluded by permanent workers, mistrust because of not feeling represented by the trade union and unfairness because of not getting what you were entitled to. Our results also showed how coping resources played a moderating role in the stress process: e.g. lack of support heightened the vulnerability of TWA employees to encounter strain because of precarious experiences. In fact, the findings of this qualitative research offer us a deeper understanding of findings in survey research, where temporary or TWA employment [26,27,30] and aspects of precarious employment [19,21,23,67] are associated with adverse outcomes of mental health and well-being. However, also more positive experiences are mentioned. More specifically, it concerned the buffers such as control and support, experiences of freedom because of the temporary character of TWA employment and challenge because of learning opportunities. These examples show how TWA employment can activate employees, which may positively affect well-being. The

role of these buffers and aspects of TWA employment that activate or motivate agency workers shed light on why studies did not consistently find atypical forms of employment to be associated with poorer health [26,27]. Particularly, the focus on lived-through experiences instead of associations between variables renders us a useful, in-depth understanding of the pathways linking TWA employment with mental well-being.

Moreover, most studies about the effects of atypical forms of employment, such as TWA employment, on health and well-being have the tendency to focus on employment instability (e.g. type of contract, job insecurity) [23]. In this study, we took into account different aspects of precarious employment (employment instability, low material rewards, erosion of workers' rights and social protection, de-standardised working time arrangements, limited training opportunities, lack of possibilities for employee representation and imbalanced interpersonal power relations) [19]. Since, each of these dimensions is related to coping resources, this study provides a more complete account of how TWA employment affects mental well-being.

This research also reveals useful recommendations for further research. First, the results suggest a difference in vulnerability depending on several personal valuable attributes (such as skills), and the social environment of employees (household situation and financial situation). We found, for example, differences in terms of control between higher and lower-skilled agency workers. Persons in a weaker position appear to have more difficulties coping with their non-standard employment situation. Possibly these circumstances turn 'non-standard employment' into 'experiences of precarious employment'. That the consequences of non-standard employment differ depending on workers' individual and collective control over skills and other valued resources is already argued by Kalleberg [8] and is consistent with the assumptions of the stress process [46]. This is an issue that should be explored more in depth in future studies. Second, research about the perceptions of TWA employees in continental European welfare states is still scarce [11,68]. More specifically, it would be interesting to perform similar studies to validate our findings and to get more insight into the pathways linking precarious employment and health. For example, our study touched upon the fact that temps are often doing the dull, tough or dirty jobs, while the better jobs are reserved for permanent employees. This is

a finding that fits within the pathway running through the differential exposure of precarious workers to adverse physical working conditions [9,69], which warrants future research. Furthermore, our study focussed on the social and personal coping resources as a means to explain the relation between characteristics of TWA employment and mental well-being. In future research, also the coping styles and strategies TWA employees employ merit further exploration, since they are another important part of the stress process.

Finally, this research enables us to make policy recommendations to the Belgian government, the TWA sector and the trade unions. First of all, although TWA employees have more rights in Belgium compared to most other countries, they are not always aware of these rights. Information provision by all actors is very important to strengthen the vulnerable position of TWA employees. Second, giving equal rights to TWA and permanent employees can reduce feelings of injustice and inequity among the first group, and as a result decrease negative effects on their well-being. However, our study revealed that governmental control over the application of these rights is crucial, since abuses continue to exist despite 'good' regulations. Appropriate control and sanctioning can be a positive signal to the TWA employees, and can lessen their feelings of powerlessness, lack of support, mistrust and unfairness. They may feel more protected and respected by employers and society at large. Their complaints about a lack of recognition emerged from the responses of interviewees when contacting them to talk about their experiences and be involved in this study: 'Finally, there's someone who wants to listen to us!' (Mia). This makes clear that many TWA employees lack social support and feel isolated.

In summary, our study revealed that it is important to consider the impact of TWA employment on mental well-being as a cyclical process in which TWA experiences and the strain/activation that they bring about have an impact on the mental well-being of workers, but also on future experiences and perceptions. In this process, coping resources play both an intermediary as a moderating role. The complexity of this process, shown in the accounts of TWA employees, may offer part of the

explanation for inconsistent findings in descriptive studies on the relations between TWA employment and other atypical forms of employment and mental well-being.

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## **8 Tables**

Table 1: Characteristics of the sample

### **Gender**

Men: 5

Women: 7

### **Age**

18-29: 2

30-49: 5

50+: 5

### **Educational level**

Lower than secondary education: 2

Secondary education: 7

Tertiary education: 3

### **Occupational class**

Blue-collar work: 8

White-collar work: 4

## 9 Figures

Figure 1: The role of coping resources in the stress process

