

**“Angels“ and “Chameleons“ - The Cultural Construction of the Flexible Temporary  
Agency Worker in Sweden and Britain  
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## **Introduction**

In the world of work, long-term, permanent employment has long been vital in the formation of a collective as well as personal identity for the worker. It has provided a base for collective action as well as a sense of community, both on the local and the translocal scale. A measure of continuity and security, in geographical as well as contractual terms, was assumed to be highly significant for these to develop. Sparked by high levels of unemployment throughout Europe and by the dismantling of welfare systems, the idea of “lifelong permanent work“ is now increasingly being eroded. Standard contracts covered by collective bargaining agreements, the concentration of work in large factories or office sites, and the expectation of permanent employment are being questioned and increasingly dissolved (Allen & Henry 1996:67; Beck 1992). In its place, a new employment regime is said to be taking shape; one driven by the idea of “flexibilization“. Its contours are made up by geographical dispersal and organizational fragmentation of the workplace, and a greater flexibility in employment contracts, in working hours, and in skills. With the old assurances around jobs disappearing, employment risk, as Beck (1992) would have it, is being regularized. Today’s workers are faced with new expectations and new contexts within which to construct a sense of identity and community. To the extent that work has provided a basis for community formation along professional and class lines on a national level, these are now giving way to more individualized ways of relating to work, and more contingent forms of togetherness (cf Bauman 1995).

In the ongoing transformation of the world of work, “flexibility“ has emerged as a preferred point of direction, an enchanted term connoting a desired end result. Notions of flexible employees navigating in flexible labour markets imply that were these circumstances to be fully understood, our image of how the labour market operates and the kinds of employees that populate it would be radically transformed. Without invoking its mirror-image explicitly, we are led to understand that these are significantly different from the rigid and highly regulated collective structures and set of perspectives we are accustomed to. When entering into discussions about the different aspects of flexibilization we are, therefore, operating in what Schneider (1993:2) calls “an enchanted milieu,“ confronted by circumstances and conceptual invocations as yet peculiar and new to us.

The flexibilization of traditional contracts and ways of work involves, we may agree, a disintegration of the certainties of industrial society and a challenge of old national boundary-lines and structures. A striking aspect of the discourse of flexibility is the extent to which it has spread across nations and filtered into the everyday language of employees. Notions like “a flexible labour market,“ “flexible organizations“ and “flexible employees“ are not only reflected in the ideas and actions of managers and politicians, but are integrated into the everyday life-world of employees transnationally. In this sense, then, we may speak of a pervasive globalization of the discourse of flexibility. And not just of the concept itself, but more importantly, of its performative potential, its power to construct and shape new realities of work, and even life-styles and perceptions of self and body (cf Martin 1995).

Increased individualization in this context means that employment opportunities are experienced as personal risks, risks that need to be dealt with on the level of the individual. For the employees who belong to the category of flexible workforce, to be confronted in this way with a new understanding of the labour market is both exciting and sometimes even thrilling, yet often coloured by a measure of unease. The excitement comes from being situated on the verge of a new understanding of how work is organized and what role the individual is to play in the world of work. The unease, on the other hand, stems from the ripping down of their prior sense of how that world works and how to operate competently within it. In the view of individuals in the flexible workforce, the labour market has lost much of its prior solidity and predictability. Rather than resting comfortably with previously learnt expectations about its workings, they are now faced with the challenge of acting within labour markets of increased competition and individual responsibility.

We can hence think of the discourse of flexibility as being enchanted or enchanting when it invokes notions of a different, alternative kind of labour market and individual disposition, a condition beyond understanding in structural or conventional terms. Its power to thrill lies in its character as a slippery, amoebae-like concept, resisting domestication and escaping clarification. It is difficult if not impossible, to provide a clear definition of flexibility (Watson 1994:239). As a term, flexibility has the capacity to embrace a variety of meanings, yet at the same time to frame mutual understandings. It acquires meaning only in the context in which it is used, and in reference to the position and interest of the actor. Its rhetorical power stems precisely from its multivocal character. It may be used as a convenient shorthand for a cluster of meanings, to legitimate certain actions and ideas, to encourage certain modes of thought and behaviour, and to close off further arguments. Hence, its inherent conflictual dimension, raising issues of power and responsibility, should not be underestimated.

This paper will discuss the cultural construction of the flexible temporary agency worker as an emerging social category.<sup>1 2</sup> The focus is put on the semantics of flexibility as constructed and expressed on the level of the temporary employment agency and the individual temporary agency worker. We are interested in how the temporary employment agency frames an understanding of what constitutes the flexible temporary agency worker through talk, employment procedures, evaluation criteria, advertisements, and the like. It is through these multiple layers of interaction that the very structuring of a categorical identity takes place. However, in order to look more closely into the richness and variety of these interactional processes, we need to get close enough to the fine texture of individual experiences. Thus, we will also try to convey how the experience of working as a temporary agency worker is expressed by the individuals themselves. In particular, we will inquire into what it means “to be flexible“, how and when the concept is invoked by temporary employment agencies and temporary agency workers to frame an understanding of what constitutes the notion of “the flexible temp“.<sup>3</sup> It is suggested that this is a contested domain, within which “flexibility“ is fused with conflictual meanings that reflect its embeddedness within different national contexts with particular contractual arrangements and historical trajectories of work regulation. Whilst temporary employment agencies are working to create a category of employees with a particular bundle of characteristics and to reduce individual differences, there remains a scope of interpretation as to its precise meaning. This lack of precision may then be used as a powerful regulatory tool in the hands of transnational employers.

When discussing the making of the categorical identity of the flexible temporary agency worker, we will relate to the theory of reflexive modernization (Beck 1992, 1994; Giddens 1990, 1991, 1994). However, we will advocate a more critical stance to its consequences in suggesting that the cultural construction of the flexible temporary agency worker entails not just the freeing of the individual agency from structures and regulations, but also the putting in place of new forms of subjugation and regulation. The reflexive modernization thesis, as formulated by Beck and Giddens is, in Lash’s (1994:111) words, “a strong programme“ of individualization. Its core assumption is the progressive freeing of agency from “fordist“ structures. Knowledge-intensive production entails self-reflexivity in the sense that the

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<sup>1</sup>In relation to employment contracts, flexibility is generally understood to mean employees who are not working on full-time, permanent contracts. Here, we are interested in a more limited category in the flexible workforce; employees who are involved in what is loosely referred to as “agency work“. This means that the temporary employment agency places the employee on short-term contracts, during which he or she is assigned to work for and under the control of the undertaking or establishment making use of his or her services. It is a category that constitutes a small proportion of the labour force, but one that is growing in importance and numbers on a global scale.

<sup>2</sup> The paper is to be part of a forthcoming volume edited by Bo Str ath, *After Full Employment: European Discourses on Work and Flexibility*.

<sup>3</sup> The paper is based on interviews with temporary agency workers and staff in Sweden and Britain during 1996-98. To a lesser extent, participant observation at temporary employment agencies and at client organizations have also been conducted. Internal documents, such as policy documents, information leaflets, administrative forms and promotional material, have also been studied and analyzed. The fieldwork has been financially supported through research grants from the Swedish Council for Research in Humanities and Social Sciences and the Swedish Council for Work Life Research.

monitoring of workers by rules is increasingly replaced by self-monitoring. While the theory of reflexive modernization sheds light on crucial elements of the current state of affairs in the labour market, we will argue that a new set of structural conditions of reflexivity are emerging, which function as frameworks regulating the formation of a categorical identity. Following Lash, we suggest that the receding social structures and regulations that permit greater scope in agency in this context are being largely replaced by other means of social control that are transnational in character.

The ways in which temporary employment agencies work to promote a category of flexible employees show, first of all, that the workplace remains a principal site for the formation of self-identity (Miller and Rose 1995). Also, the norms and practices, the assemblage of ideas and devices, the ways of thinking and intervening, seek to regulate and shape the understanding of self and other in particular ways. In the attempts to link individuals subjectively and emotionally to their productive activity, "flexibility" has acquired a vital place. Such attempts are therefore, we argue, performative in their nature.

The process of globalization and its conflictual dynamics leads to a situation in which the performative power of flexibility appears in different shapes in different national contexts. The differing structural conditions for temping in Sweden and the UK respectively, and the varying historical trajectories of flexibilization make for variations in the ways flexibility is understood and enacted upon. The institutional frameworks of state control and regulation show significant differences, since Sweden and Britain have taken different tracks to deal with employment issues. It will be seen that while temporary employment agencies are actively involved in organizing the global flow of perspectives and ideas on work, the perspectives of temporary agency workers may to a significant extent be described as locally restricted, and the nature of their community as contingent. There is little sense of a shared collective identity for temporary agency workers, neither at the national nor the transnational level, through which collective action would be possible. Before looking more closely into what it entails to be a flexible temporary agency worker in Sweden and Britain, we will briefly sketch the recent move towards a flexible labour market in the two nations.

### **Temping in Sweden and Britain**

Sweden and Britain present two very different cases in relation to the ways in which temporary flexible work is addressed and structured, which makes them interesting comparative cases. While both countries position the permanent contract as the norm, there are major differences as to what extent this policy has been pursued by the state, and how and by whom non-permanent, temporary work is regulated. This means that the tripartite relation between the temporary employment agency, the worker and the user or client has varying content, with various expectations and perspectives attached to parties. The similarities stem as well from the wide diffusion of a flexibility discourse with strong market-oriented undertones of individual entrepreneurship and freedom, intensively fuelled by temporary agencies. These influences on the construction of the flexible temporary agency worker interweave in complex ways that make them difficult to disentangle.

*Sweden: Penetration of market values*

How and by whom employment issues should be regulated has long been a central concern in Swedish labour market politics (Furåker 1979). And so it is today. Swedish governments since the 1940s have stressed a strong commitment to full and permanent employment, accompanied by direct state intervention and responsibility for the regulation of how job placements were to be arranged as well as for working conditions and benefits. Entrusting these issues into the care of the state were to ensure that the market forces and private interests did not intervene in the process in search of profit and private gain. Therefore, it is all the more significant that the transformations of today speak of regulatory changes unseen for half a century, with responsibilities being recast under the heading of deregulation and flexibilization.

In Sweden, as elsewhere, market values have penetrated across institutional boundaries into the public sector and, in particular, into the labour market. From the 1940s until the 80s, the commercial market and the state remained two culturally separate domains, where state representatives were able to reflect on and to critique the values and workings of the market at some distance. This is no longer the case (Garsten 1997). Consequently, it is not merely the pendulum of state - market power that has swung too far. The marketplace is now to some extent sitting *inside* the processes that forge the constitution of the labour market. State agencies have to respond to and deal with the deep new penetration of commercial marketplace values into the structures traditionally associated with the constitution and regulation of the labour market. The issue however, is much broader historically and globally than the immediate national conflict of values might suggest. The penetration of market values is situated within a fundamental shift in the wider culture that surrounds labour markets. This is a shift from the modernist culture of relative certainties and regulated boundary-lines to a culture that has shrugged off the traditional certainties and regulations and introduced pluralistic and conflicting images in its stead. The implications are profound, for the construction of the new flexible agency worker as well as for the construction of work, identity and community. The penetration of market values into the Swedish labour market is therefore but one aspect of a global organizational trend which aims to implant market values within the culture of state organization.

Whereas labour unions, employers associations and corporate leaders may, and indeed do, have differing views on what exactly flexibilization should mean, there is nevertheless a general agreement on the idea that the labour market needs to encourage mobility and entrepreneurship in order to boost business and to counteract high levels of unemployment. This involves not just the advancement of flexible production systems in industry, but the flexibilization of employment contracts and working hours. While flexible employment contracts is the favourite topic of employers associations and private business, flexible hours is the preferred one on the agenda of labour unions and Social Democrat politicians. The latter connects to, and is dressed in the language of, a continuous concern for the quality of working life, placing primary stress on flexibility *for* workers, not *of* them. Flexible hours is seen as an important part of a more democratic, productive, and fulfilling mode of governing work, compatible with a more expanded notion of the role of the worker. It is generally regarded as promoting women's participation in the labour market, whilst flexible and contingent contracts are viewed as threatening to gender equality.

It is however, the issue of flexible employment contracts that has been subject to recent deregulations of a nature and to an extent that has challenged established Swedish

perspectives on employment relations and work identity. It is also around this topic that the public debate has been most intense. Against the background of a strong state framework of governance and control, and a hitherto unquestioned view of full and permanent employment as the norm, the idea of flexible contracts through private employers provides a powerful threat to established practices. Accordingly, temporary agency workers were long statistically referred to as “a-typical” or classified as “unemployed“. Not least did their existence stir strong debates about the marginalization of certain groups, notably low-educated women, in labour segmentation discourse. Temporary agency workers were not only financially seen to be at a risk; they were also risking to become marginalized in relation to the community of workers on permanent contracts.

Despite the strong normative backing of state intervention and control, it was not until in the 1940s that permanent and temporary employment placement was taken over by the state and private employment agencies were gradually abolished. The Labour Market Board exercised control over the observance of the laws and could grant permission to run placement bureaus for profit (SOU 1997:58). However, even though temporary placement of labour was strictly regulated by law, uncertainties regarding the exact interpretation of these regulations paved the way for a successive growth of private temporary employment agencies during the 70s and onwards. There was, especially in some segments of the industry, a strong need for administrative personnel who could temporarily relieve corporations of pressure during peak production periods and externalize employment risk. The temping business thus continued to grow in spite of the relatively strict regulations. Occasional state inspections and sanctions did not put a halt to its growth. On the contrary, it continued to prosper in the margins of state legislative structures, apparently awaiting a successive de-regulation.

Since the early 1990s, concomitant with and marked by, exceptionally high levels of unemployment, there has been a successive de-regulation of the Swedish labour market. The installation of a new law in 1992 meant that temporary placement of employees, with some restrictions, was legalized, with no demands on authorization through state agencies. The ILO-convention (nr 96) that had prohibited profit-driven private placement was also abandoned. In 1993, another law was installed, involving a deregulation of the previous state monopoly on permanent placement and an abolishment of the restrictions on temporary placement that still operated (SOU 1997: 58). These regulatory changes dramatically changed the scene. Temporary employment agencies now had free hands to expand their hitherto tentative business. Even so, the government continued to play an important role in the regulation of temporary agency work through surveillance and sanctions, thereby keeping flexibility at a bay.<sup>4</sup>

A couple of years later, a Commission on Working Life Issues was set up, with the explicit aim of investigating how the labour market could be made more flexible, while maintaining a degree of security for employees. A special investigation was also organized on behalf of the Labour Department with the aim of analyzing the effects and consequences of the deregulation. In relation to the temporary employment industry, one goal was to look into

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<sup>4</sup> By the state also abandoning the previous policy of granting temporary agency workers unemployment benefits in between assignments, the agencies were recognized as employers having to take full responsibility for their employees, instead of living off the hands of unions “providing them with stock“, as a representative of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation put it. The state could now still to some extent function as a buffer against too much global market infiltration.

eventual needs for new regulations and a mandatory state authorization of private temporary employment agencies. The decision, which was made public in spring 1998, was that no further legislative regulations or state authorization were needed, a decision applauded by the industry but provoking negative reactions among labour unions. For the temporary placement industry, this signalled acceptance of their business by the state, and the legitimization of further growth and a general move towards flexible employment contracts. Neo-liberal market rhetoric of economic growth, downsizing and outsourcing thus married with governmental hopes that these moves would also create more job opportunities and ameliorate unemployment statistics.

At present, about 0,44% of the Swedish workforce is employed through temporary placement agencies ([www.spur.se](http://www.spur.se)), and the number is growing steadily. The bulk, around 80 %, of the temporary agency workforce is made up of women. This speaks to the fact that the kind of jobs that are cut down on in organizations and then offered by agencies are mainly those traditionally associated with women. Clerical work and financial administrative positions still dominate, even though technical support, computing and warehouse services are growing. There is also a tendency for increased professionalization of the business, convergent with the development in many other countries, including the USA. Medical staff and accountants are growing in numbers. Most of the temporary agency workers are relatively young, with an average of just above thirty years of age. The normal length of employment is between one and two years, with the average assignment period being a month or less (SOU 1997:58, p 42). An investigation by the Salaried Employees' Union reported the level of education among their temporary agency members to be relatively high, with three out of four having completed upper secondary school and half of these having additional higher level education (HTF 1996). According to the Salaried Employees' Union report, almost half of the temporary agency employees started working in the business because "there was no other alternative". Temping was also perceived as attractive, since it offers "flexibility" in the sense of variation and change, getting acquainted with different kinds of workplaces, types of business and companies, and different tasks. It offers a chance to change workplace, jobs or business, and to find a permanent, stationary position (HTF 1996). A study undertaken by the Swedish trade association of temporary employment agencies (SPUR 1996), confirms that learning, variation, and hopes that it will lead to a permanent and stationary job are important motives for temping. This study also reports that half of the temporary agency employees would prefer a permanent, stationary position to a contract with a temporary employment agency.

Temporary work in Sweden is, generally speaking and despite recent changes, relatively clearly regulated by legislation and collective bargaining. Normally, the temporary agency worker is employed by a single temporary employment agency, and receive payment according to the number of hours worked each month. Temporary employment agencies are (as in most European countries) looked upon as employers of temporary agency workers, meaning that labour law and social security legislation applies. In between assignments, they are generally entitled to 75% of their regular wage, as a result of an agreement between the parties. They are also entitled to normal employment benefits, such as sick allowance, pension, parent's allowance and the like. This being the ideal employment contract, there are also other, less permanent contracts, built on occasional demand and thus of a more temporary nature. Even so, while employment risk is being increasingly individualized, making Sweden one of the least regulated countries in this particular area, there is still a relative measure of security for individual temporary agency workers.

Whereas the tendencies towards a deregulation of the Swedish labour market strikes many as being both unsettling and provocative, it is in Britain where a greater resonance with such a risk scenario can be discerned (cf Allen & Henry 1996:68). The institutional configurations, the social norms and practices which underpinned the post-war economic expansion have been progressively undermined, and have given way to a period of experimentation in different organizational forms and different employment and management practices (Walsh 1997:3). Successive Conservative Governments since 1979 have sought to deregulate the labour market in an attempt to allow employers to operate more freely (Noon and Blyton 1997:15). Deregulating employment has generally had the effect of shifting the balance away from employment protection towards employment flexibility, involving consequences for those both in and out of work and imposing restrictions on the operations of trade unions (Noon and Blyton 1997:16). This policy of deregulation has been underpinned by theories of neo-classical economics which hold that economic revival is dependent on allowing market forces to operate free from government intervention and “artificial” constraint. Outsourcing, subcontracting, and the proliferation of individualized employment were viewed to demonstrate flexible responses to market demand.

In this process, a new set of political ideals have been articulated, problematizing what was perceived as a neglect of the values of autonomy, entrepreneurship and self-motivation. The British debate on “enterprise culture” connected the notion of flexibility with a distinct set of ideals concerning production and the identity of the worker that aligned ideals of individualism to neo-liberal political visions. “Enterprise” here meant not simply an organizational form, but rather an image of a certain mode of activity that could be applied equally to organizations, to individuals within organizations, and to persons in their everyday existence (Miller and Rose 1995:455). The political vocabulary of enterprise, as it took shape in the Thatcherite 80s, promised a new identity for the individual and gave rise to new strategies of governing the workplace, in which order was to be achieved through individuals working upon and disciplining themselves, to become entrepreneurial, flexible, employable and socially competent. As Miller and Rose (1995:454) put it; “The political vocabulary of enterprise established a versatile set of relations among a critique of contemporary institutional forms, a program for the revitalization of economic life and national power, and an ethics of the self.” In the free market ideology that was infused into the labour market, notions of the competitive, enterprising individual and consumer together came to form something of a new semantic cluster, mobilized in policy-making as well as employment advertising. For management doctrines as well as political visions, its new political salience opened a fertile territory for the development of a variety of programs and series of deregulations aimed at reinvigorating individual initiative and infusing vitality into the labour market. In a Foucauldian sense, these managerial doctrines and political visions may be seen as political technologies, or vehicles through which new forms of power were formed and put in place.

This avenue has to a large extent been followed also by the New Labour Government, which stresses the importance of reducing “rigidities” and promoting “flexibility” in labour markets in order for both business and individuals to become more entrepreneurial. In this context, flexibility is one of the most widely-discussed issues in the British labour market. It is used



both as an analytical concept to explain structural changes and as a point of direction for changes in the world of work. Critical voices have aired concern about the “social dumping” effect of flexibilization as well as its relation to the “feminization” of work. Feminization here refers not only to the sheer number of women in the “contingent workforce”, but also to values and manners culturally ascribed to females and thus held to be “feminine”<sup>5</sup>

Temporary employment agencies play a vital part in the flexibilization scenario, as temporary staff are becoming an increasingly significant part of employment planning in Britain. Market reports indicate that the recruitment of temporary workers through temporary employment agencies is increasing annually at a steady pace (see e.g. *Key Note, Employment Agencies, 1996 Market Report*). An estimated 2,7 % of the workforce work through employment agencies (*Svenska Dagbladet*, January 28, 1996), and the industry has grown to embrace every niche of employment. Labour Force Survey (LFS) data as of 1996 and reported in Forde (1997) shows that office-based employment still dominates, with clerical and secretarial jobs vastly over-represented. This is also where we find the archetypal female agency jobs, which are secretarial work, clerking, reception and telephonist work and health associates. Almost 52% of all temporary agency workers are women, which is a lower number than in Sweden. Male agency workers are primarily to be found in plant and machinery occupations, the other area in which temping is common (Forde 1997). The temporary agency workforce is also very young, one third of them being under 25 years of age, and more likely to be single than the rest of the workforce. In terms of education, the highest qualification achieved is comparable to the employed population, but lower than that of other non-permanent employees. It thus appears that temporary agency workers in Sweden are generally higher educated than in Britain.

As Forde (1997) rightly notes, there is much debate over the extent to which the temporary agency workforce is composed of people actively choosing this form of work. Agencies are quick to identify themselves in terms of their “intermediary function”, fulfilling the needs of particular groups of workers, such as women returners to the labour market, youngsters, and people with other commitments (Parker 1994). According to the LFS data, however, the majority of them *would* prefer a permanent job. Two thirds of the temporary agency workers reported that they were temping because they couldn’t find a permanent job, over one third stated they were looking for a different job. Casey (1987:82) reports that, according to the numerous surveys conducted by agencies themselves, a substantial proportion of temps are looking for permanent jobs; but that some of these are using their experience of temporary jobs to sort out what kind of job they would like. Moreover, in Casey’s reading of the material, a similar or larger proportion claim either to enjoy the frequent change of tasks and environment, the flexibility of temping and of being able to take spells off between assignments, or to have commitments which make continuous working impossible.<sup>6</sup> Interpretative claims thus differ according to interest position.

Whereas the temporary industry in Sweden has gone through a stepwise de-regulation, carefully controlled by the state, it was never heavily regulated in Britain to begin with. In

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<sup>5</sup> This aspect of temping is highly significant, but lies mainly outside the scope of this paper. The debate on the “feminization” of work is also one with global ramifications, and one which stretches outside of temping and the labor market. See e.g. Calas and Smircich (1993), Douglas 1977, Ferguson 1984, and Fondas (1993; 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Since the findings are not very recent, they should be used with some caution.

fact, in European comparison, it stands out as being largely *un-regulated*. As Hepple (1993:269) notes; “It has often been remarked that the approach of United Kingdom Governments unlike those in many other Member States has been to allow temporary employment to be market-led, rather than government-led. The organised employment agencies and business have always argued that there is a strong demand for their services and that a state monopoly would be both costly and ineffective.”

To speak about de-regulation in this context is thus something of a misnomer. State intervention in British labour market has been and continues to be very limited, as is the role of social partners. Until 1995, though, temporary employment agencies operated on a license from the state, a procedure which is now replaced by an inspection process (SOU 1997:58). The Employment Agencies Act 1973 and the Regulations are enforced by the Department of Employment’s regional offices, whose officers also have powers to enter the premises of agencies to inspect records and other documents and to obtain information. Collective bargaining in the temping industry has been largely non-existent, even though trade unions have in recent times negotiated agreements, usually on individual grievances and with local employment business. Unions have also tried to work for establishing the same right for temporary agency workers as for permanent employees, most often on an informal basis. Deregulation then, has rather involved a reduction in the already restricted scope and extent of statutory employment protection and welfare benefits, the abolition of minimum wage-setting mechanisms and the steady erosion of legal supports for collective bargaining (Walsh 1997:4).

Despite the steady growth in numbers of “temporary workers“, they are not separately identified as a category within British labour law (Hepple 1993:259). They constitute a wide and diverse category of workers, with a variety of different experiences and needs. The temporary agency worker in Britain, as opposed to Sweden, is not necessarily considered an *employee*, and the temporary employment agency is not necessarily the *employer*. Hence, problems often arise as to the character of relation and responsibilities between the parties, and the user may become jointly responsible with the temporary employment agency for the fulfilment of the rights of the temporary agency worker, in case e.g legislative requirements would not be respected (Hepple 1993). Most of them are, nonetheless, taxed and pay social security contributions as if they were dependent employees. However, there is no mutuality of obligation between agency and worker to provide and accept work, and the agency does not “control“ the work of the temporary - this control is exercised by the client organization to which the temporary agency worker has been supplied (Casey 1987: 80).

British practice thus shifts power over the temporary agency worker towards the client organization, whereas in Sweden the employer - employee relation is relatively stronger. British temporary agency workers are consequently free to sign up with several agencies, an option not available in Sweden. Here also, the labelling of the temporary agency worker reflects the differences in the position of the temporary agency worker in the two countries. Whereas in Sweden they are often referred to as “consultants“, stressing their relatively strong relation with the employer, they are in Britain normally referred to as “temporaries“ or, more commonly, “temps“. (In the following, “temp“ or “temporary“ will refer to temporary agency workers in Britain as well as in Sweden.)

These differences between the two national contexts underline the importance of placing regulatory changes within a wider perspective, and to consider in particular the effects of distinctive types of temporary agency employment regulation and state policies on the cultural construction of “the flexible temporary agency worker”. The British labour market response may be understood as promoting a more “defensive” flexibility than the Swedish case - one that is more strongly associated with a neo-liberal labour-market strategy, with declining scope of state control and declining strength of trade unions and heightened managerial control (cf Walsh 1997). Nonetheless, the discursive power of the notion of flexibility has a strong bearing upon the ways in which labour markets, organizations, and individual employees in both countries are understood and made sense of. In other words, it has a constitutive effect upon people’s actions.

### **“Being flexible“: differing perspectives**

When discussing the making of the category of flexible temporaries, it is necessary to consider a series of contexts embedded within one another. Without attempting to consider the full range of these, we will stress the importance of taking into consideration not only the national political context and its transnationalization, but an additional influence that is becoming increasingly pervasive: the transnational corporation. The spread of temporary employment agencies across nations has meant that it is increasingly possible to identify a global influence on the type and character of employment and employees across the world under the guidance of corporate management (cf. Noon and Blyton 1997:14-15). The concept and context of the nation state still remains significant, but we need to look into the ways in which transnational corporations challenge their area of governance through their pervasive influence on employment contracts as well as perspectives on work, employment and identity. Below, we will take a closer look at the ways in which the Swedish and the British branches of Olsten Staffing Services - Olsten Personalkraft and Office Angels - influence the understanding of what constitutes “the flexible temporary agency worker”. We will see that even though the transnational impact is evident, the specific historical trajectories of flexibilization and the differing national structures under which the temps work interweave with the transnational influence in dynamic ways.

Olsten Corporation, which was established in 1950, is the world’s third largest temporary staffing agency. It employs around 700.000 people world-wide, operating from 1.500 offices in 14 countries ([www.olsten.com](http://www.olsten.com)). With its global reach and local, national penetration it appeared to be a fruitful entry-point into exploring the dynamics of national and transnational constructions of a flexible work identity.

Office Angels, its British branch, was founded in 1986 (Office Angels brochure 1996). It currently operates 55 domestic branches and is based in London. As the name indicates, Office Angels works mainly in supplying staff in the area of office work, such as secretaries, administrators, and clerk typists. Like many other employment agencies in Britain, they supply both temporary, contract and full-time staff to companies. According to an information brochure aimed at potential clients, Office Angels are:

## Committed to Individuality

Central to Office Angels' philosophy is its belief in individuality and the power of people. Wholly rejecting a 'conveyor belt' approach, the consultants focus their efforts on carefully and sensitively matching the skills and personalities of candidates with the needs of clients.

That the British labour market is generally characterized by local agreements and little centralized authority is also evinced in the fact that Office Angels has opted not to be a member of the employers' association and not to seek membership in the trade association FRES (Federation of Recruitment and Personnel), whereas its Swedish sister company is a member of the Swedish Employers' Association as well as the trade association SPUR (Swedish Association of Temporary Work Businesses and Staffing Services). The emergence of SPUR may be seen as the installation of an intermediary level of actors between corporate practice on the one hand, and state institutions on the other hand. This intermediary layer, which also has transnational connections to equivalent organizations in other nations, has assumed responsibility for erecting ethical norms for the handling of relations between agency, temporary agency worker and client and for competition between agencies (see Ahrne, Brunsson & Garsten 1998).

Olsten Personalkraft, with headquarters in Stockholm, was established in 1982 under the name Kontorsjouren. It was acquired by Olsten in 1996, and then changed its name and logotype. Being one of the largest staffing companies in Sweden, it employs 2.000 people from twenty-two branch offices ([www.olsten.se](http://www.olsten.se)). The company offers both temporary and permanent recruitment services in a broad range of areas, including administration, accounting, reception, computing, warehousing and sales. Potential clients are in an information folder given the following answer to why they should choose Olsten Personalkraft:

We at Olsten take care to understand the business and needs of our customers. This makes it easier for us to offer flexible staffing solutions. We cover all sorts of services, from simple to qualified assignments. Olsten makes use of satisfied-customer-guarantee. This means that if you are not satisfied with our services you don't need to pay - we are not satisfied until you are. [my translation]

The Swedish and British branches of Olsten, being part of a global corporation, approach their customers and temporary agency workers with similar, yet locally tailored services and expectations. We will now look more closely into their interaction with potential and actual employees.

When signing up as a temp for Office Angels, you receive a personal wallet of information from the assignment co-ordinators at the office. In it, you'll find *Your Guide to Temping with Office Angels* as well as a leaflet called *An Introduction to Temping with Office Angels*. The introduction contains offers a variety of information and guidance on temping, as well as an "assignment checklist" that is meant to facilitate for the newly recruited temp at the client workplace. Under the heading **Flexible Friends**, the flexible nature of temping is stressed:

Temping is a truly flexible option of work; you decide *when* and *where* you want to work and can choose between long and short term assignments and with a company that suits you.

Similarly, a radio advertisement in Sweden announces the benefits of working with Olsten Personalkraft;

The best in this job is the freedom; you can choose yourself *how* you want to work, *where* you want to work and *when* you want to work. [my translation]

Promotional discourse, being set free from the immediacies of work, is systematically involved in the cultural construction of the flexible temp. Ads and information leaflets aimed at new candidates or newly recruited temporaries highlight the versatility of temping. It is depicted as a flexible way of working; a way of working that allows you to tailor work to your own needs and desires; a job that allows a great deal of freedom. Advertisements in this way help construct a powerfully positive cultural identity for the temporary employment agency and its temporary agency workers.

Temps work in an environment that is rich in the variety of interpretations that can be drawn from the notion of flexibility. The multiplicity of meanings available makes it possible to invoke the term to explain a variety of experiences. As a temp you are confronted with having to make sense out what flexibility may, should, and could mean, both for yourself, your agency, and your clients.

Following Weick (1979:174), an important characteristic of an equivoque is that its multiple meanings can not be compromised; "The meanings originally are distinct, they remain distinct, and the only way they can be managed is for some of the meanings to be suppressed or ignored or for the organization to alternate among its choices of various meanings." In the world of temping, we see that agency staff and their temporaries, even though there is often some degree of overlap, sometimes have differing or even conflicting meanings attached to the notion of flexibility. There are differences in the way that flexibility is invoked and hence, what expectations are attached to the temp.

To begin with, agency staff and temporaries agree on the significance of flexibility in temping. Staff at temp agencies often refer to flexibility as an important trait of character in a good temp. Trudy, an assignment coordinator at Office Angels, would advice a new candidate by these words:

Just be very open-minded. Every company has their own way of working, which may not be the way you would work. But just be flexible, be professional. Because, at the end of the day, you're there to represent Office Angels. It is temporary work at the end of the day, but we do expect commitment and professionalism at all the times. If there is any problem whatsoever, we're at the end of the telephone. Please give us a call! We've got on hand, IT help, anything that they could wish for, really. I would say that, that would be it. Just be flexible, be conscientious, be happy, really. Because at the end of the day, it is a nice job as long as you cut out for it.

In an issue of *Bullen*, the internal news bulletin for Olsten Personalkraft, an armful of tulips was symbolically offered as encouragement and acknowledgement of a job well done to a male temp associate "...who was recruited quickly and then started a long-term accounting assignment. Thanks for showing such flexibility and doing such a good job!" (*Bullen* Nr 161, February 1997, my translation).

A good temp, in the view of assignment co-ordinators, is someone you can send anywhere, who will do the job he or she is assigned to do, and who can meet the expectations of the customer. A good temp is reliable, in that she is flexible enough to adapt to different circumstances and needs. From the point of view of the temping agency then, a flexible temp is someone who may be counted on to do the job, that may represent the agency well, and that may fill the void that the customer wants filled in a professional manner.

The temps are generally quite aware of what the expectations from the agency are. Clara, a temp for Office Angels, reflects in these words upon what the agency may look for in a new candidate:

Flexibility. Someone who can adapt well and is willing to work for different assignments for them. Somebody that's not going to let them down.

Niklas, a temp for Olsten Personalkraft, expresses a similar view;

Olsten looks for somebody who can function, who is a little flexible. I'm more flexible myself than many others. They can book me on lots of jobs, my skills are varied, and I have stressed that in the wage negotiations. ...It's a question of personality. [my translation]

Temps, just like agency staff, tend to stress the importance of flexibility as important for succeeding at temping. But for them, it means adapting to the client, being of service. In the words of Kate, who works for Office Angels:

Just be flexible. You've got to be! You can't be set in your own ways. Just be flexible and go with the flow at the company that you are working with. Just fit in and pick up the company's ideals for however long you're there. Otherwise it just won't work.

Cathy, a temp for Olsten Personalkraft, says;

If you apply for such a job, you have to be a little flexible, to like serving people. But you also have to be able to say no if it gets too much. [my translation]

The connotations to "angels" are obvious here. Temps, when they are at their best, are rescuing angels, lending a hand for clients in need. Temps are there when and where you need them the most, not making demands or pushing their own needs, but adapting to the needs of the client. In passing, one of the assignment co-ordinators at Office Angels remarked that customers sometimes call to ask them to send them an "angel", referring of course to a temporary help.

Olsten Personalkraft's temporaries are sometimes referred to as "chameleons", able to change and adapt themselves according to the context. Olsten Personal-kraft temps could tell about the company's sponsoring of a TV-series named "The Chameleon", which was seen as a manifestation of the commitment of their employer to the idea of flexible adaptation.

Temps know that, from the agency's point of view, the most important is to make the customer satisfied, and to represent the agency well. To do this, they acknowledge the need to adapt themselves, their mindsets, their manners, and their own expectations of the job accordingly. Carolyn, one of the "Angels", expresses this flexible attitude poignantly:

Well, getting a phone call at 5.30 in the evening and say: "Right, you've got to start work tomorrow at nine o'clock." You've got to be flexible and say: "OK, I was going to do this now, but I won't now, because I've got a job." Also, flexibility, I think, describes the personality. You have to be able to shift from one work to the next, and not mind particularly having one day in one place doing one thing, and then moving on to a different place the next day.

Her Swedish colleague, Anna, refers to a related aspect of adaptation;

Flexibility means that you must be ready to meet with different people, people from different nations, and with varying habits. It also means that you have to be ready to make coffee, to serve it to the customers on a tray, do the cleaning-up, and the like. You have to adapt. [my translation]

Beyond adaptation, versatility, and reliability, flexibility for temps carries the potential for freedom. Here resides yet another meaning of the term that is significant for them. When asked about the advantages of temping, temps themselves often refer to the freedom of movement that it offers them. Niklas, one of Olsten Personalkraft's temps, thinks that temping is a flexible job arrangement, because "it's easier to ask for a leave". He took the job with the intention of keeping it until he could find a more permanent position somewhere else. However, he has not found anything suitable yet, and is not as active in job-searching as he was in the beginning. He feels there is no hurry, since this job allows him to take some time off, to travel, and the like. Even so, he has not done much in that direction.

Temping offers the freedom to decide not to work for a period of time; to travel, study, or to take time off from working life to be with your children. Oftentimes, however, it is the *potential* of flexibility, rather than the realization of a flexible working life, that represents its power of attraction. Few of the interviewed temps are actually making use of the flexibility they describe as an advantage. For most of them it remains a promise, or a potential not yet realized.

Part of the explanation for this is the fact that they hardly dare to say no to an assignment offered, since that could jeopardize their future possibilities of getting a next assignment or a permanent position. The mere risk of missing out on future assignments makes them want to work as much as possible while they can, and to postpone ideas of making flexibility come true. Another reason often given is that they can not afford to go on vacation, since they need all the money they can get.

Laura, a long-term temp for Olsten Personalkraft, exemplifies this by saying that flexibility gives a lot of freedom at work. However, she continues;

You have to accept every job offer that comes up. I mean, you can refuse, but then you'll have gaps in your bookings. That's not flexible! On the other hand, flexibility means that you don't have to take on a lot of responsibility at work. [my translation]

Potentiality and actuality are, obviously, two very different things. Reliability and freedom do not always go hand in hand. Working in the flexible workforce carries promises of freeing oneself from the regulatory structures normally associated with salary-work. It is a domain of work which is in some sense indefinite, in the sense that future obligations and bonds have to be made, rather than inherited, as it were. Being, in Turner's (1969) sense, "betwixt and

between “ the structures normally associated with salary work, temps have the opportunity to try out new ways of relating to work, new ways of constructing work identity (Garsten 1999). Here, the rhetoric of flexibility works to ignite the potential of constructing one’s own, personal work-biography, to decide for oneself when and where to work (cf Giddens 1991). In this sense, temping offers a zone for play and transcendence. Even if other expectations (like that of being a reliable temp that takes on the job offered) and structural limitations (like the lack of vacation money), make the potential difficult to realize, it is there as a possibility. For the few who have the resources and strength to turn flexibility into an actuality, temporary work offers a kind of work life with many advantages, while for the rest risk and uncertainty may be more conspicuous. We are thus beginning to discern a process in which some temps are “winners“ in the flexible labour market, and others are “losers“; some having the means by which to access and make use of the advantages of flexible working contracts, and others lacking the resources to do so.

The offers of temping come with quite different implications for temps in Sweden and Britain, though. While flexibility to choose when and where to work is there as a promising potential, as one of the multiple significations of the term, it is really more about adaptation to the client’s needs and the agency’s expectations. In Sweden, making use of freedom by taking a leave would mean not being entitled to the guarantee salary that normally applies between assignments. The employment relation to the agency would in most cases still be retained, however. In Britain, it would not only mean no pay, but jeopardizing the already volatile and unclear relation to the agency, since temps are not regular employees, and the agency not necessarily their employer in the strict legal sense. To be a flexible British temp is thus basically about being reliable, since the precarious tripartite relation is constantly at stake. Flexibility thus, is an equivoque infused with a certain enchantment, no doubt, but also with interpretative limits.

### **The limits of flexibility: making up the ideal temp**

Interestingly, the procedures of employment and evaluation of the temps strike a contrast to the destandardization and flexibilization that is striven for in the set-up of employment contracts and in the rhetoric of desired employee characteristics. A closer look at the process of getting a temporary job through a temporary employment agency reveals that there are standardized and highly routinized ways of recruiting an individual to a temporary assignment and of evaluating him or her, in both Sweden and Britain. Even so, the difference in relations to agency and client makes for differences beneath the apparent similarity of the process. The competitive edge of flexibility gains a more pronounced expression in Britain than in Sweden.

As you enter the doors of Office Angels, you step right into the reception desk, where you are greeted by the receptionist. Preferably, you have already made an appointment with one of the assignment co-ordinators, you have brought your CV, and the receptionist will then ask you to take a seat while waiting. Normally, the assignment co-ordinators will receive everyone interested in applying for a job, since competition in the area is tough. As an applicant, though, you are hardly aware of this fact.

In the waiting area next to the entrance, there is coffee and soft drinks, as well as an assortment of magazines for distraction. While waiting, you are asked to fill in the *Registration*



*Form*, with all the details possible about the type of job applied for, skills in typing, previous job experiences, preferences in type of firm, and other details. References are very important, and are always checked, and you should be able to give at least two. You are then put through a couple of tests, involving spelling, visual accuracy, typing and the like. The receptionist then makes a classification of your skills according to the test results. She takes a picture of you, which is then attached to the *Registration Form*, the test results, and the CV. Taking the picture, the receptionist tells us, is often experienced as an intrusion, since the candidates often feel uncomfortable with it. It is, however, considered very valuable to have the picture when possible candidates for a particular assignment are discussed.

When the candidate has gone through this procedure, it is time for the interview with one of the assignment co-ordinators. The interview normally lasts about ten to fifteen minutes, and the candidate is then given a folder, a personal wallet called *Welcome to Office Angels* - with information on administrative routines, such as how to fill in timesheets, pay day and cheque cashing, insurance, etc. In this wallet is also enclosed the folder *An Introduction to Temping with Office Angels*, which was mentioned earlier.

It happens that the candidate is offered an assignment during the interview itself, but the normal procedure is for the assignment co-ordinators to check references carefully before giving an offer. Usually, this is a fairly quick procedure, and there are ready-made forms to fill in to facilitate the process. If the candidate proves to be promising and there is a job-opening available, an offer is normally given within a few days. On the other hand, there are large numbers of applicant registration forms that never seize any interest archived in the office.

At Olsten Personalkraft, new applicants are also interviewed by an assignment co-ordinator following an appointment. In conjunction with the interview, she or he fills in a so called *Knowledge Form* (*Kunskapsblankett*, my translation). This form asks for information on a number of topics, such as current salary and employment, references, union membership, preferred working hours and region, as well as kind of position applied for, educational and professional background, and eventual sickness problems. Instead of having the applicant go through a test, the applicant is asked to rank his or her degree of proficiency in relevant areas in the form. Attached to the *Knowledge Form* is a *Development Card* (*Utvecklingskort*, my translation), with five empty boxes for notes to be taken during future performance reviews (*utvecklingssamtal*).

New Olsten Personalkraft recruits are, as regular employees of the firm, more closely drawn into the corporate structure than their British colleagues. They are also provided with brief, written information on the corporate structure and fields of business, as well as educational classes given in the near future. Introductory classes for new employees are given once every month, and as a new Olsten Personalkraft temp, you are expected and encouraged to attend. Along with the written information handed over after recruitment, is a sheet of paper with "Things to remember while working at Olsten". These tips state that you should:

- Be prepared - when we call you should be ready to go
- Leave home in time
- Introduce yourself at the client's
- Show respect
- Keep a low profile in the beginning of a new assignment

- \_ Don't take on the customer's bad habits
- \_ Be curious and take initiative
- \_ Always be on time
- \_ Tell your contact person at Olsten about your strengths, weaknesses, goals and visions  
[my translation]

A more thorough information on the company and its goals and practices is given in a folder called *A job to love* (*Ett jobb att älska*, my translation). Along with the corporate vision and more general information, a number of concrete guidelines as to how to fill in your timesheet, during what hours to be on standby for a new assignment, how to call in sick, etc., are given. A couple of timesheets and envelopes are included, as well as an Olsten pin to wear at work.

A flexible labour market, according to the scenario of temp agencies, involves the empowerment of individuals and the opening up of possibilities for new ways of working. According to the folder *A job to love*, a job as a "consultant" at Olsten offers you excitement, personal development, challenges and individual reward. However, we argue, it also involves new interdependencies and the subjugation of the individual to new kinds of regulations and measures of standardization. In the processes of recruitment and evaluation, the individual candidate goes through a series of steps that are predetermined and standardized. The kinds of skills and traits of character that are considered relevant and important for being a good temp are already decided upon. They are evaluated and classified according to common, pre-defined categories. It is partly through these standardized processes that the individual is constructed and framed as "a temp" and included into the categorical identity of flexible temporaries.

Thus, even if the individual self is increasingly made the subject of entitlements and obligations in the labour market, this does not mean that the temporary is in every sense free to construct his or her own biography and self. On the contrary, the making of a flexible temporary agency worker entails a construction of a categorical identity fraught by contradictory discourses of the self. By this, we mean that while individualization is stressed, it is at the same time circumscribed by the implicit or explicit demands for adjustment to the collectivity of temps. There are expectations as well as regulations regarding temporary agency workers that to a great extent limit the degree of individualization and freedom to construct one's working life and professional self as one chooses. As we have seen above, flexibility has its limits, and the process of getting a temporary job is highly standardized. The individual temp is caught up in webs of interdependence with global reach.

The significance of this categorical shaping appears in full clarity when mirrored against the expectations of freedom from regularization and collectivization that the temps give expression to. For example, one of the temps at Office Angels, when asked about her view on the role of unions in the temping business, strongly asserted that one of the reasons why she was negative to them was that she did not like to be "regimented." She was against any form of collective pressure and formation in her working life. Even so, we may argue that the very conditions under which she works act in the direction of a regimentation, as a diffuse and uni-directional surveillance and production of order.

Temps at Olsten Personalkraft and Office Angels are always evaluated after a completed assignment. The manner in which the evaluation takes place is highly standardized, both in

Sweden and in Britain. When an assignment is completed, the assignment co-ordinator at Office Angels sends a paper sheet entitled *Assessment* to the client. On this paper, clients are informed that:

OFFICE ANGELS temporaries are rated and rewarded through constant appraisal of task achievement and attitude to work.

Your own assessment and comments would be extremely useful in this process and we would be grateful for your input. An addressed envelope is attached for your reply.

Client evaluations are considered very valuable to the agency, and as they are received they are attached to the bundle of papers that together make up the record of the individual temp.

While the testing that a new candidate has to go through concentrates on the skills of the candidate, the evaluation concentrates on the perceived traits of character and behaviour of the temp. His or her enthusiasm, skills level, accuracy, attitude, punctuality, appearance and overall suitability is rated, and the client is asked whether they would specifically request this person to work for them again. At Olsten Personalkraft, a similar procedure of evaluation is undertaken, using an *Evaluation Form (Utvärderingsblankett, my translation)*. Furthermore, the individual temp is evaluated by Olsten Personalkraft once a year. During this performance review, the temp may also share his or her experiences from temping, for example regarding what assignments have been most and least appreciated, and why.

To enhance and reward professional competence and appropriate behaviour, the temp agencies regularly announce awards that are made public among the temps and staff. At Office Angels, clients are encouraged to nominate temps for their Temp of the Month Award. This is done on a form, on which they are asked to tick the reasons given for nomination among a predetermined set of skills and characteristics, and to write down "outstanding features of personality/skills/contribution to my Company". The winner receives a Filofax leather calendar and a bunch of flowers. Olsten Personalkraft offers the recognition of "Golden Ant" on a yearly basis to temps in different categories. There are, for example, the categories of The Receptionist of the Year, the Accountant of the Year, The Olsten Employee of the Year, and the Newcomer of the Year [my translation]. The winners are made public in the newsletter *Bullen*, and rewarded with a diploma and an ant coloured in gold on the yearly customer- and employee party. These awards work to encourage identification with agency expectations and to foster acceptance of the company's claims on their performance.

Temps, in both Sweden and Britain, are generally aware of the fact that they are being evaluated, and consider it "good" and "reasonable". A good evaluation helps them in getting a good assignment, they tend to say. There is also a general understanding as to the competitive character of the labour market, and the normality in being evaluated. Thus, they may be said to participate in governing work and in promoting a particular understanding of the identity of the flexible temp. Work, in the view of temp agencies, is no longer viewed as imposition of constraint, order and routine upon the individual, whose individuality and personal goals work against company objectives. On the contrary, the temp is depicted as an enterprising individual in search of meaning, responsibility, and a sense of personal achievement in work (cf Miller and Rose 1995). In the view of both agency staff and temps, flexibility is a necessary trait for the full engagement of the aspirations of the individual in the

pursuit of opportunities in the labour market. Standardized recruitment and evaluation procedures are part and parcel of the schemes of government that seek to establish and make operable the flexible temp identity. The reflexive self-monitoring of the temps links them subjectively to the construction of this identity.

Again, the national context within which this is done makes a difference. While the Swedish temp may rely, to some extent, on the relative security of having a regular employment, albeit with varying financial output, the British can not. In trying to match the image of the ideal temp there is more at stake for the British temp than for the Swedish, in terms of individual risk and responsibility.

### **The reflexive temp: self-monitoring and emotional labour**

Characteristic of temping in both Sweden and Britain, albeit to differing degrees, is what one might call a “manufactured uncertainty” (Giddens 1994:184). Many aspects of working life, such as if and when there will be a next assignment, where one will go for the next one, are undecided until shortly before the current assignment is terminated. The continuity of temping is organized only in terms of “scenario thinking,” in the way of an as-if construction of possible future outcomes (op cit). This means that the individual temp is made to reflect upon the possible options and limitations of temping, and their own, individual role in influencing its outcomes. Transiency, we may say, has become a more or less permanent condition, in which the temps themselves, to borrow Giddens’ phrasing (1994:75), “have no choice but to choose how to be and how to act.”

One way of doing this is to pay attention to continuous learning in order to stay “employable”, as labour market rhetoric has it. In the folder *A job to love*, Olsten Personalkraft emphasizes the importance of:

#### **Continuous development**

We know that it is important to develop one’s competence within one’s professional area. We can offer you that. We can also offer you more. During 1997 we are enlarging our learning departments to modern, comfortable and easily accessible knowledge centres. These are open for you, as much as you want. Come on in during day- or evening time, practice on a switchboard or surf the Internet. Test your knowledge in Excel or learn PowerPoint from the basics, everything is possible! The knowledge and competence you have when you start working with us, we’d like you to maintain and develop. Serviceable both for you and our customers. Your chances of varied assignments increase with the breadth of your competence. Take advantage of the chance you get through Olsten to learn something new.

Apart from developing skills and competence, the individual is also made to reflect more consciously on the kind of impression he or she gives off in front of the client, and how to manage and improve the impressions given off. The enhanced reflexivity and the increased concern about individual appearance and manners is, we suggest, a significant aspect of the construction and maintenance of the categorical temp identity. As Rogers (1995:152) rightly spells out; “The agency relationship creates a stronger need for emotional labour in two ways. First, the temporary worker actually has two jobs: one as a clerical worker at the hiring company and another as a representative of the temporary employment agency.” Even

though her material builds on interviews with temporaries in the US, the basic condition of the agency relationship is valid in UK and Sweden as well. Like the temps interviewed by Rogers in southern California, the temps at Office Angels and Olsten Personalkraft are highly aware that they are considered representatives of the temporary employment agency and that their future assignments may depend upon their accommodation to the clients.

Working as a temp also entails adhering to certain expectations and collective codes. It may indeed be said that part of being flexible means to be able to accommodate different clients. "A reliable temp", in the view of Office Angels, is one that can be sent anywhere, to whatever client needs his or her services, and that can adapt to different tasks. It also entails adopting a friendly attitude and avoiding to become involved in company gossip or conflicts. Performing this kind of emotional labour is understood to be more than situational adjustment; it is a skill you acquire through having done temping for a while and having learnt how to be socially flexible with the right attitude.

Knowing that they are constantly monitored and evaluated does not generally make the temps nervous or particularly uncomfortable. However, it does affect their view on the importance of manners and appearance. Beginning at registration, temporaries are advised and socialized, formally and informally, to be attentive to and to conform to the agency's standards (Henson 1996:144). Temporaries in Britain are expected to "dress in a business-like manner to suit the company you are temping with" (Office Angels, "assignment checklist"). Likewise, temps at Olsten Personalkraft are given written as well as oral guidelines as to how to dress:

#### **Dresscode**

When you are on an assignment you are Olsten's face outwards. Therefore it is important that you dress professionally and that you use Olsten's PIN. Dress up a little for your first day on the assignment. We use neither jeans nor tights at Olsten.

*(A job to love, my translation)*

Olsten Personalkraft temps are sometimes provided with a business suit to facilitate dressing appropriately for a new assignment. While the suit sometimes comes in handy since you do not have to reflect upon what to wear for a new assignment, few of the interviewed temps report to wear it regularly. It does, however, provide them with a degree of comfort to know that it is there, should they need it. One temp told me she always had hers ready on a coat hanger at her client's office.

Learning to temp is also the acquisition of a specific sort of female reflexivity. It involves being attentive to the needs of the client, in terms of what tasks are to be performed, but also an attentiveness to appropriate dresscode, manners and the like that are not only professional but also gender-appropriate. The gendering of flexibility reveals itself in the subtle forms through which a "feminine" code of conduct is fostered; one marked by social versatility, sensitivity and responsiveness to other's expectations and needs. Temps are generally well dressed and well-behaved, with a ready smile on their lips. Many of them emphasize the need to "fit in" in terms of dresscode and manners as part of performing well. Generally, they say, it is better to dress professionally the first day. When you have taken cue from the others in the office, you can adapt your dress accordingly.

Assignment co-ordinators routinely make notice of the appearance of the candidates. Sometimes a written note is made in the personal record of the temp and comments are sometimes heard about some candidate being "smartly dressed" or a little too "scruffy" to fit an assignment. The picture that is taken of the applicant as part of the recruitment procedure, is attached onto the personal register to help the assignment co-ordinators remember the looks of the temps.

Temps, both in Sweden and the UK, are also advised to avoid potentially conflict-laden behaviours or topics. As noted by Henson (1996:124), "Looking submissive or adopting a suitable demeanour with the appropriate mix of cooperation, deference, and cheer was essential for the successful performance of the temporary role and was expected and demanded by temporary agencies." Whilst looking submissive would be too strong a recommendation of appropriate behaviour for Office Angels and Olsten Personalkraft temps, they were advised not to "burden the client with your views on their routines" and "what you think of their managers" (in *To remember while working with Olsten, Att tänka på när jag arbetar i Olsten*, my translation) and "If you have a complaint tell US not someone else working in the company" and "Be friendly, but avoid becoming involved in office gossip or company politics" (in *Welcome to Office Angels*). Temporaries then, learn that they must avoid displaying too much of their personal views and emotions, that they must engage in "emotional labour" (Hochschild 1983) and "impression management" (Goffman 1971) to disguise or manage their personal attitudes and feelings to be successful at work.

The agency's claim to influence over a temp's physical appearance, manners, and emotional display is backed by the continuous reference to the need to represent the agency professionally and to accommodate to the client's expectations. To show the right attitude and to dress properly is part of what it takes to be flexible. Being flexible thus involves accepting the rules of standardization (cf Hochschild 1983:103). By linking flexibility to standardization in this way the agency can control aspects of the temps' behaviour that they would otherwise not be able to, given their spatial dispersal and mobility. The precarious character of the temp - agency relationship in Britain would lead us to think that the scope for control of the temporary agency worker's appearance and manners should be greater than in Sweden. With some caution we are also able to confirm this idea, having noted that these issues enter more deeply and with more frequency in talk among staff and in interviews with temps. Looking smart and behaving professionally in a somewhat subdued manner increases your chances on the market of temping, which is indeed a market as we commonly understand the term.

Inspired by Appadurai's formulations on consumption as a serious form of work (1996:82), we may suggest that learning how to navigate in the new labour market implies a new type of labour: the labour of reading and acting upon fashion messages and messages of appropriate conduct. It involves a social disciplining of the imagination - linking the hopes for a new, exciting or permanent job to the disciplined observation of and self-monitoring of appearance and emotional display.

Since temps do not have to wear a common uniform, there exists nevertheless a zone of variation within which they may create and express their own sense of style within the framework given by the agency. Often, temps, as well as assignment co-ordinators, are

fashion and trend conscious, and display their interest in minute details that make their dresscode appear not just representative, but somewhat smart. This zone of variation offers them both what Simmel calls “a sphere of general imitation“, a social current in which the individual can float free of responsibility for their tastes and actions, but also a certain consciousness, an individual emphasis or ornamentation of the personality (Frisby & Featherstone 1997:196). Somewhat paradoxically then, we may assert that while attention to appearance and codes of conduct may enhance the personal image and facilitate the client’s satisfaction with the individual temp, it also works to create and maintain the boundaries of the categorical entity and to protect individual integrity. By adhering to collective and standardized codes, the individual temp is at once controlled and included within the collectivity, yet maintains a sense of individuality. Reflexivity may be said to be imposed upon the temp as part of the job, so to speak. It is more a matter of adapting to existing structures and needs, than of freeing oneself from them to construct one’s own life-narrative and work-biography. Lash (1994:120) emphasizes the need to address what he refers to as “the structural conditions of reflexivity“. What underpins the reflexivity of temps is an articulated web of global and local networks of information and communication structures, in which the conditions and experiences of individual temps are to a large extent a question of their access to and place in these structures. Whilst temporary agency workers are part of the widespread global networks of temporary staffing corporations, their own sense of community and outlook on these structures is both contingent and locally restricted.

### **Contingent communities**

Temporary agency work puts traditional ways of establishing and maintaining relations with colleagues and employers into question. As a modern vagabond of the flexible labour market, the temp is always on the move; nowhere *of* the place he or she works at, but everywhere *in* it (cf. Bauman 1995:94-95). The geographical mobility and the transient character of temping makes it rather unlikely that they will strike deep roots in any of the places they work in, or develop strong attachments to other temporaries and staff at Olsten Personal-kraft or Office Angels. Expectations that long-term relations will unfold out of continuous involvement with others at a single employment setting are no longer there. Instead, temporary agency workers expect their stay to be more or less temporary, and hence, they expect little in the sense of continuity and community to arise out of their involvements with colleagues, neither at the client’s, nor at the temporary employment agency.

Nevertheless, establishing and maintaining relations to colleagues both at the agency and the client’s are of great significance. It is through the establishment of good social relations with colleagues at the client’s workplace and with assignment co-ordinators at the agency that the temporary agency workers are able to secure future assignments - assignments that could lead to a permanent contract with the client. Also, collegial relations to other temporary agency workers, even though they are also recognized as competitors, are important for airing common concerns and interests, and hence, for a sense of community identity to arise.

The structural differences in the set-up of employment contracts are here seen to make an impact on the development of community. At Office Angels in Britain, where the temps are not regularly employed, pay-checks are a means to attract them to the office. The temps are

encouraged to step by the office every Friday to fetch their pay checks and socialize with office staff and other temps:

Please DON'T forget to join us in the branch for a FREE bite to eat and a chat on FRIDAY lunchtime whenever you can - we always look forward to seeing you! (*Welcome to Office Angels*)

Friday lunchtime is indeed a busy time at Office Angels. Temps gather in the office area to get their pay checks, grab an Office Angels paper bag with their lunch sandwich and a drink, exchange a few words with the assignment co-ordinators, and then leave, apparently in a hurry to get back to their clients in time. Few of them have time enough to stay for a longer conversation with their colleagues. They may even be unaware of who the colleagues would be.

Likewise, Olsten Personalkraft temps in Sweden are reminded of the importance of keeping in touch with the agency:

We think it is important to keep in touch with you during your assignments. During your employment with us you will be invited to open houses, parties or a simple snack with your colleagues in Olsten. We will also call you when you work at the clients' to hear that everything is working all right and that you are happy. (*A job to love, my translation*)

Olsten Personalkraft temps usually don't step by the office on Friday just to pick up their pay-checks (these are transferred to their bank accounts, anyway), but whenever there are organized parties or information gatherings. Many of them think that these socials are rather boring, since they have little in common with the other temps, or hardly even know who they are.

With spatial mobility and lack of spontaneous and regular collegial contacts between the temps, little ground is left for building a sense of professional or work community. The notion of "colleague" itself becomes highly problematic. When asked about who their colleagues are, temps often hesitate, then say their "real colleagues" are at the client's workplace, since that is where they actually conduct their work. As Maria at Olsten Personalkraft says:

Right now, I feel as though my colleagues are here, at the client's. But then there are also other consultants at the office, and staff, that I sometimes meet, and that I know, and they are also my colleagues. But there are also consultants that I don't know the name of, and they are in fact my colleagues as well. But right now my colleagues are here, at XXX (client's name). [my translation]

There is also the sense that temp colleagues are simultaneously their competitors, competing for the appreciation of agency staff and for wages. Temps at Office Angels and Olsten Personalkraft share, however, the concern with developing and maintaining good relations to the co-ordinators at the office during assignments, since being known and appreciated helps them get a next, and perhaps more fulfilling, assignment. These shared interests never coalesce into concerted action of any kind, however, neither in Sweden nor in Britain. The fact that union membership among Olsten Personalkraft temps is relatively high does not seem to have any impact on the formation of interest groupings, either. There is a striking lack of ideas regarding what the backing of a union or collective bargaining might bring about for them as individuals, and even less so what it might entail for them as a collectivity. With lack



of recognition of union membership at Office Angels, the place of the temporary agency worker in the community of workers is unclear at best, evinced in the lack of formation of interest groups along these lines.

While the flexibility discourse is pervasive in the cultural construction of the flexible temp, there is a striking lack of awareness among the temporary agency workers of the local corporate and global organizational structures of which they are a part. The episodic and transient character of their involvement with other temps and with the agency makes for a local and individualized perspective, with little interest in exploring the wider network in which they are enmeshed. Very few temps know that they actually work for an American company, with headquarters in Long Island. They are hardly aware of the corporate structure outside their local branch, nor of its corporate vision. In Hannerz' (1990) terms, they are "locals" or, we might add "mobile locals", yet they make up the very web, or network, which extends throughout the world in a transnational corporate structure. To them, the global workings of the enterprise are either hidden from view or too irrelevant for them to pay attention to.

The absence of interest in wider organizational arrangements is more obvious in Britain than in Sweden. Partly, this is to do with the fact that the British office has retained its own original name and logotype, even since becoming part of American Olsten. No conscious effort is made to connect the perspectives of the temps to the American corporate structure. In Sweden, being acquired by Olsten meant that Kontorsjouren, a well established temporary employment agency and one of the first to engage in this area of business in Sweden, changed both name and logotype. A thoroughgoing redecoration of the office in terms of both colour and layout followed. The American link is now more conspicuous to both agency staff and temps. Even so, little effort is made to direct the attention of the temps to the fact that they are part of an American corporate structure.

The transnational collective shaping of processes of employment and evaluation, as well as the perspectives, expectations and manners, of temporary agency workers is thus accompanied by an asymmetry of gaze and information (cf Hannerz 1990; Lash 1994). While temps are subjugated to standardized procedures and expectations that contribute to draw the contours of a categorical identity, they lack both interest in and access to the global community of temps. There is thus little that unites them in anything more than a contingent community. The nature of togetherness is, in Bauman's (1995, Ch. 2) words, fragmented, or episodic, or both. It does not even amount to an "imagined community" in Anderson's (1983) sense. In view of these findings, we tentatively suggest that the cultural construction of the flexible temporary agency worker moves interest away from the collectivity in a manner that leaves the flexible temp with little more than a contingent sense of community, in Sweden and Britain alike.

### **Concluding discussion: contested identities**

This paper has aimed at situating the concept of flexibility within a discursive process in a particular local context of action. The aim has been to disentangle the "common" and "unique" aspects of temping in Sweden and Britain, and to trace the mediating influence of transnational corporate management. At the outset, it was suggested that the business of

flexible, temporary employment is as an enchanted domain. However, as Schneider remarks (1993:3), enchantment quite likely diminishes with familiarity, since it is evoked in part by the novelty of our circumstances and must gradually fade as we become acclimated to them. The concept of flexibility may, as time goes by, lose its rhetorical grip and fail to cease our imagination. Among the temps, we are beginning to see how the expression “being flexible” is acquiring a clichéd status, and how it is being used as a convenient shorthand for a legitimated and taken for granted set of personal characteristics and skills as well as ways of relating to work.<sup>7</sup>

In the construction of a categorical identity for the temps, the concept of flexibility has been shown to play a vital role. To the extent that it works as a mobilizing metaphor with a constitutive and performative potential, it nevertheless carries equivocal and conflictual meanings. The temp agencies aim to reduce individual idiosyncracies and to socialize the individual temp into a particular work identity, involving a particular set of skills, attitudes, manners and the management of impressions and emotions. The gendered nature of these are evident. Being flexible involves, perhaps most of all, being ready to adapt and accommodate to the expectations of the customer, to be a reliable employee in the view of the agency. Learning to be flexible also entails to be willing to be evaluated and monitored according to criteria set up by the agency. While the temps recognize these demands, the notion of flexibility carries for them a broader range of aspects; not least the potential to construct a work life beyond traditional structural limitations, to try out new modes of work and more flexible lifestyles. In this sense, temping is viewed as but one instance of a larger transformation of the re-structuring of everyday life. Also, while temp agencies would prefer their temps to look upon temping not as transitory, but as a permanent condition in itself, many temps still tend to think beyond temping, with a view to a permanent position. The business of temping may thus be described as neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined, but a space of contestation in which individuals seek to annex its potentials into their own practices.

The temp industry emerges as a contested domain, in which a variety of different meanings converge in the construction of the identity of the flexible temp. It raises broader issues of the basis for community and identity in the new world of work, challenged by the dispersion and transiency of employees, where the stationary “organization man” of high modernity is being replaced by the flexible, female temp. It speaks of issues of responsibility and power in labour markets, where national norms and regulations are giving in to transnational influences, and where individuals are having to make do for themselves to a greater extent than before. When addressing questions of local specifics and global diffusion, we ought perhaps to address as well what the nature of locality in an increasingly deterritorialized world is, or could be? Speaking with Appadurai (1996:42), contemporary transnational production and management structures may make locality, both in the sense of a local factory or in the extended sense of the nation-state, a mere fetish that disguises the globally dispersed forces that drive the production process. In this drama, the state, as we have seen in the above case, plays the delicate role of an arbiter in norms, slogans, styles, etc., on a stage where national differences intermingle with and conflict with the instruments of global market homogenization.

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<sup>7</sup> Anderson-Gough et al (1998) provide interesting case material on the use of clichés in organizational settings.

The flexibility discourse is here seen as a manifestation of the transformation of existing categories, involving new ways of controlling the individual, not only in the labour market, but also in a broader sense. The discourse of flexibility points to a tension between individual control of the work situation and the self and the framework provided by the temporary employment agency and the client organization. The discourse of flexibility entails, in other words, a tension between existing and emerging regulatory patterns in the construction of social identity. Whilst flexibilization would at first glance appear to strike a contrast to anything that leads in the direction of rigidity, structure, standardization, and the like, the case is not as simple as that. We see then, how the individualization of risk in the labour market goes hand in hand with a cultural construction of a category of workers - the flexible temps - where the procedures of being employed, assigned and evaluated involve new patterns of regulation and governance. The workplace, however dispersed and contingent it may be, is a pre-eminent site for contestations about the nature of social and cultural identity, and one that speaks to larger structures of interdependence.

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