

What's Wrong with Casual Work?

[WORKING PAPER ONLY – NOT FOR CITIATION]

Is the growth of casual work in Australia such a bad thing, and if so, why?¹

On one hand, the contractual conditions of casual work look very poor by comparison to other employment types. To see this, it is important to distinguish casual labour from part-time labour, and from contractual work which provides the benefits of standard employment on a roughly pro-rata basis. Unlike part-time work and such pro-rata contracts, casual work is structured to *exempt* workers from standard employment benefits: workers have no holiday pay, sick pay or right to regular shifts, and they can lose their job without notice. For these reasons, among others, Iain Campbell and John Burgess have termed casual work an “*officially sanctioned gap in protection*” [emphasis in original].²

On the other hand, there appears to be a surprising lack of discontent amongst casual workers themselves with these conditions. First of all, there is little social or political struggle around casual work in Australia, especially in comparison to social campaigns around precarious work in Europe. This is despite the political potency of workplace issues in Australia—as most recently demonstrated by the response to the Howard Government’s “Work Choices” legislation, and despite casual labour appearing to violate historically significant workplace norms in Australia, like that of equal pay and conditions for those for performing the same work.³

Second, important national surveys have not revealed widespread dissatisfaction amongst casual workers in comparison to workers in more “standard” employment relationships. I will focus here on Mark Wooden’s and Diana Warren’s 2004 study of

¹ On the growth of casual work in Australia, see for instance Iain Campbell and Peter Brosnan, “Relative Advantages: Casual Employment and Casualisation in Australia and New Zealand,” *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations* 30, no. 3 (2005), p. 295; Iain Campbell, Gillian Whitehouse, and Janeen Baxter, “Casual Employment, Part-time Employment and the Resilience of the Male-Breadwinner Model,” in *Gender and the Contours of Precarious Employment*, ed. Leah F. Vosko, *et al.* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

² Iain Campbell and John Burgess, “Casual Employment in Australia and Temporary Employment in Europe: Developing a Cross-National Comparison,” *Work, Employment and Society* 15, no. 1 (2001), p. 177.

³ I take this to be an implicit normative principle of the award wage system in Australia. On this point, see also Ian Hampson and David Morgan, “Post-Fordism, Union Strategy and the Rhetoric of Restructuring: The Case of Australia, 1980-1996,” *Theory and Society* 28, no. 5 (1999), esp. pp. 760-761.

the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) data, which found that only casual workers who were working full-time hours reported significantly lower levels of overall job satisfaction than other workers, and even then this dissatisfaction was primarily limited to men. Wooden and Warren concluded that attempts to “inhibit the diversity of employment options that are available to employers will often not result in changes in working arrangements that will be unambiguously preferred by employees.”⁴ Or in other words, regulation or industrial action that aims to limit casual employment may not actually be in the interests of casual workers themselves.

So the more precise questions of this paper are these: is casual work really *harmful* to workers; and if so, why does this not flow through to higher rates of dissatisfaction amongst casual workers in large quantitative studies? To address these questions, I begin by distinguishing three possible ways that critics of casual work could respond to these questions, and then try to contribute to the third.

Response 1

The first possible response is to follow Ian Watson’s 2005 reply to Wooden and Warren.⁵ Watson argues that rather than measuring casual workers’ satisfaction with their work, a more precise and more pressing assessment of the quality of casual work are the wages that casual workers receive. Watson conducts his own review of the HILDA data and finds that casual workers generally suffer a wage penalty, because the wage loading that casuals are supposed to receive in exchange for the loss of security and leave entitlements—theoretically between 15 and 30 per cent—is not proportionally reflected in their actual wages.

Watson also questions the accuracy of the subjective measures of job satisfaction that Wooden and Warren use, but note that from his perspective, what quantitative studies show about casual workers’ opinions need not be a decisive consideration in determining the quality or desirability of casual jobs. For example, Watson observes

⁴ M Wooden and D Warren, "Non-Standard Employment and Job Satisfaction: Evidence from the HILDA Survey," *The Journal of Industrial Relations* 46, no. 3 (2004), p. 295.

⁵ Ian Watson, "Contented Workers in Inferior Jobs? Re-Assessing Casual Employment in Australia," *The Journal of Industrial Relations* 47, no. 4 (2005).

that casual workers are actually *more* likely than other workers to agree with the statement that they are fairly paid. But if being paid fairly requires—among other things—that workers receive similar benefits to others when performing the same work (i.e. that casual wages are equivalent to the wages, entitlements and conditions of other workers⁶), then casual workers may be simply *wrong* to believe this. So on this issue, one way to interpret the HILDA data is as showing that casual workers are not good judges of what their labour is actually worth.

Response 2

A second possible response to the apparent lack of widespread discontent amongst casual workers is to say that while casual workers *overall* may be satisfied with their work, this does not hold true for specific industries and individuals. An industry specific example is Anne Junor's quantitative study of casual workers in universities, which found that the majority of these casual workers would indeed prefer more secure employment.⁷

The most widely cited qualitative study of particular experiences of casual work in Australia is Barbara Pocock *et al.*'s report on in-depth interviews with 55 casual workers, which was released just months before Wooden's and Warren's paper.⁸ Pocock *et al.* found that most of the casual workers that they interviewed were negative about their experiences, many were *very* negative, and that many had also tried to get more permanent work without success. An indicative example of such negative sentiments from Pocock *et al.*'s research are the remarks of Alice, a 43 year-old word-processor operator in the engineering industry, who states that:

Well I think you are used and abused...I was always under the impression that casual workers were there for overload situations, emergencies, or whatever but I've been casual for five years now... 'We'll look at that next

⁶ Of course there are different ways that equivalence could be calculated, for example, depending on whether we include just the monetary value of leave entitlements or—as seems reasonable—also some monetary equivalent of the “subjective” costs of high job insecurity.

⁷ Anne Junor, "Casual University Work: Choice, Risk, Inequity and the Case for Regulation," *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 14, no. 2 (2004).

⁸ Barbara Pocock, Rosslyn Prosser, and Ken Bridge, "Only a Casual...," (Adelaide: University of Adelaide, 2004).

year' is the general reply to any request for permanency...So, yeah, I think used and abused is the best description I can come up with.⁹

A practical advantage of this second strategy—of focusing on specific cases of discontent amongst casual workers—is that it can provide an argument for political or industrial action to restrict or improve casual work in these instances, as in the National Tertiary Education Union's current campaign to (again) place limits on the use of casual labour in universities.

Response 3

I find both these first two responses compelling; however, there are also limitations to each approach. First, Watson rightly notes the difficulty of accurately measuring the subjective job satisfaction of casuals, and also convincingly shows the wage penalties that casual workers tend to suffer. Yet as qualitative studies show, for those casuals who are dissatisfied with casual work the lost wage benefits or entitlements are only part of what makes them dissatisfied, and not always the most important part. This means that a *full* evaluation of the desirability or otherwise of casual work must somehow include the "subjective" elements of this work, even if this dimension of work is not easily measured. Or in other words, even *if* casual workers were actually paid the full casual loading, qualitative research indicates that there would still be reasons for casual workers to be dissatisfied with their conditions, and a comprehensive analysis of the effects of casual work would therefore need to take these other forms of discontent into account.

The second strategy—that of contrasting the quantitative and qualitative studies of casual work—does support a critique of casual work that incorporates both material and experiential costs of casual work in particular industries and cases. However, and second, without further engagement with the quantitative data it does not support a robust critique of *casualisation*, since such a broader critique must demonstrate that there is something *generally* problematic about the growth of

⁹ Barbara Pocock, Rosslyn Prosser, and Ken Bridge, "The Return of 'Labour-as-Commodity'? The Experience of Casual Work in Australia," in *AIRAANZ - Reworking Work*, ed. Marian Baird, *et al.* (University of Sydney 2005), p. 462.

casual work, rather than just specific instances of discontent. Nor does simply highlighting the differences between quantitative and qualitative data adequately explain the puzzling gap between these two types of research.

This leads to a third approach, which is to maintain that casual work tends not to be in workers' interests, but in ways that are not well captured in existing quantitative studies. There are different versions of this third approach, one of which is to question whether *comparing* the job satisfaction of casual workers to the job satisfaction of workers on standard employment contracts adequately measures casual workers' satisfaction with their conditions. For example, in contemporary societies workers on standard contracts face their own particular forms of dissatisfaction such as over-work, which means that the satisfaction of workers on standard contracts with their conditions may provide an insufficiently neutral point of comparison against which to assess how satisfactory casual working conditions in fact are.¹⁰ In turn, if an assessment of how satisfied casual workers are with their conditions must be substantive rather than comparative, then there is good reason to think that qualitative rather than quantitative studies will best satisfy this demand.

My particular contribution to the third approach though is to try and specify more precisely likely effects of experiences of casual work on workers' well-being,¹¹ and then review the extent to which these effects are included in relevant quantitative studies. I begin this task by locating the dissatisfaction with casual work visible in the qualitative research within a broader philosophical account of how work in general can improve or undermine workers' well-being. I then use this account to argue that casual work has structural tendencies to undermine workers' well-being, but that these tendencies are not adequately measured by the data that Wooden and Warren use (and perhaps not in any quantitative data, although I will not defend this claim here).

The philosophical account of work that I will sketch out in the next section elucidates two ways that experiences of work in general can affect workers' well-being, which is by allowing—or not allowing—workers to: (1) exercise and develop their capacities;

¹⁰ Thanks to Shaun Wilson for raising this issue in discussion.

¹¹ By an *experience* of work I refer to what it is like to perform a particular task in a given physical and social environment, as opposed to how work affects workers through the money or resources that it provides.

and (2) be recognised by others. Of course, these effects do not by any means exhaust the contributions that work can make to workers' well-being. However, I will argue that delineating these effects clarifies problems that casual working conditions tend to create, and—when combined with qualitative research—provides reasons to think that these problems are more widespread than quantitative research into job satisfaction currently suggests.

Work and Capacities

The first idea—that work can improve well-being by allowing workers to exercise and develop their capacities—applies a broadly Aristotelian concept of well-being to work.¹² While Aristotle himself would not endorse the view of work posited below, James Murphy has shown how Aristotelian concepts can nonetheless be usefully applied to work.¹³

The most relevant Aristotelian idea here is the claim that well-being consists principally in the *exercise* of realised capacities; which is to say first of all, principally in what we do rather than in what we have. On this point, one contribution of work in general to well-being is that work is paradigmatically an activity where we exercise our capacities to act in the world. A second dimension of this Aristotelian approach is that well-being is increased by the exercise of more fully developed or *realised* capacities. John Rawls has summarised this latter view in his “Aristotelian principle,” which states that:

other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realised capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realised, or the greater its complexity.¹⁴

Again, work can have a critical role here, because the actions we take at work can develop or degrade our capacities over time, through the actions we repeatedly perform and through the guidance of, or collaboration with, our colleagues. This kind

¹² My use of “well-being” rather than *eudaimonia* or “human flourishing” here is of course one departure from Aristotle’s approach. This is deliberate: “well-being” is used in this context to designate a “thinner” account of the good than the Aristotelian concept of human flourishing implies.

¹³ James Murphy, *The Moral Economy of Labour* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). See also Andrew Sayer, “Contributive Justice and Meaningful Work,” *Res Publica* 15 (2009). One crucial modification Murphy highlights is to abandon Aristotle’s explicit view that productive activity (*poiesis*) contributes to “human flourishing” only through the product rather than through the activity.

¹⁴ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 426.

of satisfaction is also highlighted by Richard Sennett's analysis of "craftsmanship," since Sennett's concept of craftsmanship includes the particular satisfaction that is found in progressively mastering the skills of one's work over time.¹⁵

Recognition and Work

A second contribution of work in general to well-being is the opportunity that work can provide for workers to be *recognised* for the capacities they employ, and for the contribution that their work makes to others. The concept of recognition I use here is drawn from Axel Honneth and Christophe Dejours, both of whom view recognition from others as a pre-condition of autonomous action.¹⁶ Very briefly put, Honneth's claim is that autonomous action requires certain types of self-conception; for instance, minimal levels of self-respect and self-confidence. But these self-conceptions cannot be achieved in isolation, but rather requires that aspects of oneself are adequately recognised by others. For instance, it is difficult to maintain a healthy sense of self-respect in a society that consistently treats you or your social group with disdain, even—or perhaps especially—where this disrespect is undeserved or unwarranted.

From Honneth's perspective then, to be recognised by others is not simply a pleasurable experience, but rather provides a kind of platform for successful or healthy action. Conversely, to be persistently denied legitimate recognition is not simply a form of suffering, but may create various dysfunctions or pathologies at the level of self-identity. I will illustrate what these claims mean more concretely by reviewing two forms of recognition that bear directly on work: rights and esteem.

Rights: For Honneth, rights are a form of recognition because of what rights imply about how a person is viewed by others. Specifically, Honneth argues that in being

¹⁵ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Allen Lane, 2007).

¹⁶ On Honneth's view of recognition, see esp. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity Press, 1995). Many of Dejours's works are yet to be translated into English, but for an indicative account, see Christophe Dejours, "Subjectivity, Work, and Action," in *Recognition, Work, Politics: New Directions in French Critical Theory*, ed. Jean-Philippe Deranty, *et al.* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Christophe Dejours, "From Psychopathology To Psychodynamics of Work," in *New Philosophies of Labour*, ed. Nicholas Smith and Jean-Philippe Deranty (Leiden and Boston: Brill, forthcoming); Jean-Philippe Deranty, "Work and the Precarisation of Existence," *European Journal of Social Theory* 11, no. 4 (2008).

recognised as bearers of rights, we are acknowledged as sharing a basic equality with others; namely, that of being equal rational agents. Such recognition in turn enables us to regard ourselves as proper objects of respect, and so supports a basic level of self-respect.

Now while Honneth does not directly apply his approach to workplace rights, his analysis can easily be extended to include such rights. In particular, if workplace rights are conceived of as markers of respect in Honneth's sense, then such rights do not only protect workers' entitlements. Rather, workplace rights also facilitate a particular stance to self and others, whereby workers can view themselves and others as sharing a basic equality before the law. So for instance, with shared workplace rights, an otherwise marginalised worker may face her co-workers aware that she is the proper subject of at least the basic forms of mutual respect that are embodied in industrial agreements and laws. Conversely, inequities in workplace rights may not only entrench unequal access to entitlements, but also create formalised systems of disrespect, and so undermine the positive self-relations that institutionalised respect from others supports.

Esteem: Where rights recognise our fundamental equality with others, to be esteemed is to be acknowledged for what is distinct and valuable about us in particular. For example, when we recognise career achievement, we express esteem for the particular abilities a person has exercised over their working life. As being recognised with rights enables a person to view themselves as a proper object of respect, being esteemed enables a person to see themselves as a unique object of value, which is to say, to develop self-esteem.

We can further distinguish two distinct types of esteem that work may provide. One is esteem for the contribution that a person's work makes to society, as reflected most notably in wages and in general social discourse about his or her work. For example, both the wages and social position of surgeons represent high esteem for the contribution that surgeons make to social health. By contrast, the wages and social discourse around care work represents low esteem for this work, despite the significant contribution that care work in fact makes to the social good.

Yet Dejours also emphasises a second type of esteem that work may provide, which is recognition of the particular skills and capacities that a person exercises at work. For example, we may find that while a particular surgeon is well-regarded in society, she is not esteemed by her colleagues and co-workers, who think her skills mediocre and her work ethic poor. Conversely, we may find that a care worker who is poorly paid and barely acknowledged by society is nonetheless held in high esteem by *other carers* for her skills and commitment to her patients.

Casual Work and Well-Being

Having sketched out two ways that work in general can contribute to well-being, I now argue that the conditions of casual work have structural tendencies to undermine these contributions, in at least three ways.

First, the lack of rights and minimal legal status of casual work threatens not only these workers' access to resources and entitlements, but also to the type of self-respect that equal rights supports. This is especially problematic in those industries where casual workers are performing the same tasks as workers on more standard employment contracts, because this expansion of dual employment systems within the one workplace tends to formalise unwarranted hierarchies of (dis)respect, and hierarchies which workers will confront on a daily basis. Such ongoing misrecognition—especially for workers in the oxymoronic category of “long-term casuals”—may in turn threaten workers' conceptions of themselves as sharing a basic equality with other workers on these terms.

Second, the process of casualisation means that casual workers increasingly lack access to career paths, because much casual work lacks possibilities for career progression comparable to standard employment relationships. For example, a corollary of casualisation in universities is that casual positions that may once have been stepping stones into tenured positions are increasingly long term experiences.¹⁷ Yet casual positions typically have little opportunity for career progression *within* this employment type; for instance, casual teaching positions in universities include only two employment categories: (a) workers with a doctorate;

¹⁷ For an overview of casualisation in academia, see for instance: Tony Brown, James Goodman, and Keiko Yasukawa, "Academic Casualisation in Australia: Class Divisions in the University," *Journal of Industrial Relations* 52, no. 2 (2010).

and (b) workers without a doctorate. Such a lack of career progression for casual workers has obvious material costs; however, it is important to note that in contemporary “work societies” a career path is not simply a determinant of income. Rather, a career path also designates a progression from less to more demanding work, and career progression is (still) one significant form of social esteem. By limiting access to career paths, casualisation thus tends to undermine both the development of skills and capacities and workers’ access to legitimate esteem for the work that they perform.¹⁸

Third, casual work also tends to undermine workplace esteem through the typically smaller presence or “voice” that casual workers have in the workplace. An example from Pocock *et al.*’s study are the following remarks by “George,” a forty year-old technician who has been “casually” employed by the same firm for 10 years. George states that as a casual worker:

You don’t ever feel that you fit in as part of the team properly. For instance they have work days where you are just rostered off and you’re not even thought of so you know you’re paid for that day but you’re not also included in the things like the picnic days, the Christmas shows, any other functions that might be happening...

Sometimes I feel like dirty dishrags where I’ve just been wiped ... you know. Because it’s downgrading, it’s depressing...

I mean a lot of times the comments made are ‘he’s just a contractor’. Well, I may be just a contractor but I’m also part of that team when I’m needed and an integral part of that team. But they always say ‘Oh, you’re just a contractor’ or ‘Contractors aren’t allowed...’ and you know, that reflects on your family life as well. You get depressed about it and you come home depressed ... It’s a really hard existence.¹⁹

The misrecognition George experiences here can be termed a structural consequence of casual employment because his contribution to the workplace is judged commensurately with the marginal status of his contract, rather than with the actual contribution that his work makes to his organisation. In the present context, a striking feature of George’s remark is how he reports his experience of misrecognition at the level of self-conception. That is, what George finds depressing is that his view of himself as an “integral part of that team” is not reflected in the way

¹⁸ Note that Wooden and Warren base their analysis primarily on “satisfaction overall;” however, this compounds rather than ameliorates the lack of specificity in the individual measurements.

¹⁹ Pocock, Prosser, and Bridge, “Only a Casual...!,” p. 92.

others view him as “just a contractor.” On this issue, George’s experience not only illustrates how misrecognition at work can damage well-being, but more precisely how it can do so by undermining one pre-condition of a healthy self-conception, which is the need for the view we hold of ourselves to be to some extent reflected and confirmed in the eyes of others.

So What?

So what—if anything—does this analysis of casual work add to our understanding of the apparent lack of discontent amongst casuals in quantitative data?

First, the analysis above delineates effects of casual work that the HILDA data that Wooden and Warren use is unlikely to capture. In particular, the HILDA data only asks respondents to numerically rank their satisfaction with five features of work: job security; work itself; hours worked; flexibility; and satisfaction overall. Yet as regards the issues just raised, these measures are frustratingly vague, and in some cases contradictory. For instance, what exactly does a worker’s satisfaction with “work itself” designate? Does it refer to how interesting the worker’s task is, how well it challenges and develops her skills, or how well she is recognised by others for performing this task?

While no study can be expected to capture all relevant variables, the analysis above highlights specific cases where the different effects that these variables putatively measure will tend to pull in opposite directions. For instance, in casual academic teaching work, an extremely interesting task is coupled with low pay and conditions relative to other workers, and a lack of recognition in typically “casual” ways.²⁰

Asking these casual workers whether they are satisfied with the “work itself” or “work overall” thus encompasses two fundamental but diametrically opposed effects of work on well-being. On the one hand, there is the satisfaction of an interesting task with unique opportunities for capacity development. On the other hand though, there

²⁰ A common theme in qualitative studies of casual work in general is the marginalisation of casual workers from workplace deliberation and activities, which for casual academics takes the form of a frequent lack of desk space, pigeon holes, library cards, e-mail addresses, and so on, within their places of employment. On these issues, see for instance Tony Brown, James Goodman, and Keiko Yasukawa, "Getting the Best of You for Nothing: Casual Voices in the Australian Academy," (Sydney: National Tertiary Education Union, 2006); Brown, Goodman, and Yasukawa, "Academic Casualisation in Australia: Class Divisions in the University."

is the lack of workplace *esteem* for that task, both formally in the lack of career progression and informally through workplace marginalisation.

This tension—between satisfaction with one’s work task and dissatisfaction with the casual conditions under which a person works—has of course been identified elsewhere.²¹ However, the framework above not only allows this tension to be put more precisely, it also provides a case for extrapolating such costs of casual work to a wider set of casual workers, *provided* that the tension here is indeed a consequence of some more general pre-conditions of human well-being at work. Otherwise put, if the philosophical framework developed here is plausible, then it provides *independent* reasons to think that the forms of “dissatisfaction” we see in qualitative studies of casual work will—to a greater or lesser extent—extend into the experiences of other casual workers, at least insofar as these types of discontent are not adequately captured by the limited quantitative measures of worker satisfaction used by Wooden and Warren.

However, and second, the above analysis also implies that there are unique difficulties in accurately measuring satisfaction at work where the types of recognitive processes that Honneth and Dejours identify are involved. For instance, if the analysis so far is right, then one effect of the lack of rights and esteem for casual workers will be to undermine workers’ sense of themselves as equal participants in the workplace, and as making a valuable contribution to the production process. From this perspective, one partial reason why workers may not express greater dissatisfaction with their conditions is that the conditions themselves create and sustain the impression that casual workers are not of great value to the organisations which employ them, even when—objectively speaking—this is clearly not the case.

For example, even with up to 40 or 50 per cent of university teaching being performed by casual staff,²² casual academic workers still often report their role as

²¹ e.g. Pocock, Prosser, and Bridge, "The Return of 'Labour-as-Commodity'? The Experience of Casual Work in Australia," p. 462.

²² This figure is from an Australian Learning and Teaching Council Report, as cited in Brown, Goodman, and Yasukawa, "Academic Casualisation in Australia: Class Divisions in the University," p. 171.

being in some sense illegitimate or peripheral to their employer. For example, one casual academic remarks that:

Well you're *not a real staff member*, you're not at staff meetings, you're not aware of what is happening in the university in a broader sense...You're just picked up the week before the semester starts and dropped when the semester ends [emphasis added].²³

This quote initially supports a contention by Pocock *et al.* that “permanency confers voice,” because this casual worker clearly thinks that participation in her workplace is conditional on a permanent employment contract. However, if workers judge how “real” their engagement in the workplace is in part by whether their views are sought or considered, then it might be said that the converse is also true—i.e. that “voice confers permanency”—at least in so far as “permanency” designates how a worker *experiences* their attachment to a workplace rather than their formal employment terms. If this is right, then the tendency for casual workers to be marginalised in workplace deliberation and activities will compound in these workers’ subjective experience the already marginal terms of their contract.

Another way to articulate this second point is by noting that this casual academic worker’s perception of herself as peripheral to her workplace does not come from nowhere, but rather is consistently reinforced by the conditions of her work, such as by the frequent lack of even a stable physical presence for these casual workers within their workplaces (i.e. a desk). More generally speaking then, if one effect of casual working conditions is to sustain a perception amongst casual workers that their work does not make a valuable contribution to their organisations, then casual workers’ apparent satisfaction with their conditions may be to some extent a *consequence* of casual work, rather than—as Wooden and Warren claim—a justification for it.

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²³ Brown, Goodman, and Yasukawa, "Getting the Best of You for Nothing: Casual Voices in the Australian Academy," p. 35.

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