

# Occupational health and safety of temporary and agency workers

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## Abstract

Previous quantitative studies have established a link between precarious work and occupational health and safety (OHS). Using an ethnographically informed qualitative approach, this article investigates the workplace experiences of different types of precarious workers, in particular those who are directly-employed temporary workers and those who are engaged through an agency. Drawing on the work of Andrew Hopkins, the article finds cultural practices that lead to worsened OHS experiences for those who are engaged through an agency. These experiences include inadequate safety training, poor quality personal protective equipment and a lack of clarity of supervisory roles.

## Keywords

Atypical employment, contingent work, dual labour market, flexibility, health and safety work

## Introduction

The majority of studies into the occupational health and safety (OHS) of precarious workers have found that these workers have poorer OHS outcomes (see, for example, Quinlan, 2003; Quinlan et al., 2001, for meta-analyses). However, within this diverse group we find both directly-employed temporary workers and those engaged through an employment agency. The latter group face a specific set of issues, notably the lack of legal clarity as to who is responsible for their OHS (Howes, 2011), coupled with an increasing diversification of the people taking this type of work (McDowell et al., 2008). With the use of an in-depth ethnographically informed study, this article aims to investigate the underlying cultural causes of differences in OHS outcomes for these groups. Drawing on the work of Andrew Hopkins (2005), who identifies four cultural practices which influence the creation, or impediment, of cultures of safety, agency workers are found to experience inadequate safety training, provision of poor quality personal protective equipment and a lack of clarity of responsibility for their supervision.

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## **Divisions between core and temporary workers**

A growing body of literature has investigated a variety of outcomes for those workers who are considered to be precarious. Within this group of workers we find people on a variety of different contracts, including those who work on a temporary basis, but are directly-employed, and also those who are engaged on a short-term basis through an employment agency. When first considering temporary workers, it is found that, as well as experiencing poorer working conditions based on factors such as pay and job stability (Deutsch, 2005; Eib et al., 2014), resulting in lower levels of job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Dawson et al., 2014; Vujičić et al., 2014), this group has also been found to receive lower levels of training, notably in induction (Kochan et al., 1994; Selcraig, 1992). Managerial models such as Atkinson's (1985) core-periphery model divide workers on contractual status, suggesting that these temporary workers should be engaged on a transactional rather than relational basis (Williamson, 1985, 1996; Williamson and Ouchi, 1983) and be utilised to create numerical flexibility. Where workers have low levels of uniqueness in terms of their human capital, or as Stewart (1997: 90) puts it 'one job-holder is pretty much as good as another', organisations will purchase workers on a short-term contract and then invest little in training as the jobs that they are performing do not require high levels of skill.

Potentially linked to these lower levels of training, a review of over 50 works investigating the link between contractual status and OHS (Quinlan et al., 2001) finds that the majority of studies record a positive link between precarious employment and injury rates. A further study by Quinlan (2003) again found that the majority of the studies reviewed found a link between precarious work and safety. However, it should be noted that these meta-analyses do reveal some conflicting findings. In explaining why there may be a difference in OHS outcomes based on contractual status, Gunningham (2008) notes that in high risk sectors, such as mining, workers have faced the dual threat of dwindling trade union representation and increasingly precarious work. Robinson and Smallman (2006) find that in the manufacturing sector there is a correlation between the presence of a trade union and a lower injury rate, particularly where there is a specific OHS representative. However, trade unions have often been opposed to temporary and agency workers, with few showing the development from exclusion to engagement noted by MacKenzie (2009).

## **Divisions between directly-employed and agency workers**

Agency workers present a particular case of temporary work, and therefore their OHS outcomes may be different to directly-employed temporary workers (Underhill and Quinlan, 2011). When considering agency workers, Lloyd and James (2008) argue that the use of agency workers has two effects on health and safety – first that new workers are more likely to have an incident in the workplace as a result of unfamiliarity with the environment, and second, that they are less likely to be in trade unions (Ackers et al., 1996) and therefore have less representation with regard to health and safety issues. Agency workers may be unaware of the processes for reporting potential hazards or near misses (Aronsson, 1999; Johnstone and Quinlan, 2006) and, perhaps more importantly, may be

unwilling to criticise the company at which they are working as they do not wish to jeopardise their chances of renewing their contracts under a triangular employment relationship (Forde and Slater, 2005, 2006; Koene et al., 2004; Smith and Neuwirth, 2008).

A particular problem for agency workers is the lack of legal clarity over who is responsible for their training and OHS. The legal status of temporary workers has been contested in many different nations around the world, as noted, for example in Lamare et al.'s (2014) study in New Zealand. Within the European Union, Howes (2011) notes that there remains a lack of clear understanding as to who is responsible for the OHS of agency workers owing to the complexities of the triangular employment relationship. This responsibility may be seen to be either of the agency or of the end-user or, in some cases, of the individual worker themselves. Interestingly, advice from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) for agency workers in the United Kingdom notes the responsibilities of workers themselves, and not just the agency and the organisation at which they are placed (HSE, 2014a). The key pieces of European legislation aimed at ensuring equality of treatment for workers, including for health and safety issues, are identified as Directive 91/383/EEC and Directive 2008/104/EC. However, Howes (2011) states that this latter Directive represents a missed opportunity to clarify the employment status of agency workers and thus the responsibility for their health and safety. Instead, domestic law has been left to each member state of the EU, resulting in the lack of clarity that affects so much of this triangular employment relationship.

These issues of responsibility have further been noted by Rubery et al. (2002: 645), who state that 'The notion of a clearly defined employer–employee relationship becomes difficult to uphold under conditions where employees are working ... on-site beside employees from other organizations, where responsibilities for performance and for health and safety are not clearly defined, or involve more than one organization.' This confusion occurs where people can work *for* one organisation, but *at* another one across fragmented organisational boundaries (Marchington and Vincent, 2004; Marchington et al., 2005; Rubery et al., 2002). When this occurs, organisational responsibilities at even a very basic level, particularly around safety, may become unclear (Johnstone and Quinlan, 2006).

Adding to this problem is the heterogeneity of this workforce, particularly when considering migrant workers (see, *inter alia*, Clark and Drinkwater, 2008; Curries, 2007; Holgate, 2005; Krings et al., 2011; Silla et al., 2005; Thompson et al., 2013; Wickham et al., 2009). The issue of migrant workers has become particularly important in the UK since the A8 EU expansion of 2004 (see, for example, Anderson et al., 2006; Drinkwater et al., 2006; McDowell et al., 2008) when eight Central and Eastern European countries joined the EU. Although the UK government predicted that this would lead to an increase in migration of between 8000 and 13,000 people to the UK (Dustmann et al., 2003), over 600,000 people from the A8 nations registered to work in the UK within the first three years of accession (Cooley and Srisikandarajah, 2008), with over 1 million registering during the operation of the Worker Registration Scheme between 2004 and 2011. As a result of low levels of English language skills, many of these workers have taken jobs through employment agencies, thus negating the need to pass an interview directly with an employing company through the medium of English (Hopkins B, 2009). However, these lower levels of English language skills may have an effect on workplace OHS if these migrants cannot understand instructions and training related to their safety (Hopkins

B, 2009). This increasing diversity of workers, particularly amongst agency workers, has additional effects on workplace health and safety.

## Culture and OHS

Despite these divisions across contractual status, an organisational culture which emphasises safety may aid in the reduction of safety risks for temporary and agency workers. In Hopkins's (2005) study of organisational cultures he states that 'organisational culture is widely understood as the *mindset* of its *individuals*, but that it is better seen as the *collective practices* of an *organisation*' (2005: ix, emphasis in original). Hopkins further notes the importance of leaders in creating an organisational culture which recognises the importance of safety, but that in many cases the actions of leaders within organisations relegates the importance of safety. For example, an organisation may monitor their production levels in real time, while only producing safety reports on a monthly basis. This is found by Antonsen (2009a), who, in a case study of the petrochemical sector, reports evidence of a focus on efficiency and production targets, rather than on safety.

For leaders to create a safety culture, Reason (1997) notes four cultural practices that must be embedded within the organisation. The first of these is a reporting culture, where near misses and unsafe procedures are reported as a matter of course. Organisations cannot just expect workers to be risk aware, a process which merely shifts the responsibility of safety from firm to worker. The firm must have a culture that means that reports are acted upon. Second, there must be a just culture, where only recklessness or malice are met with blame. If this is not the case, then people within the organisation will be deterred from reporting issues. There is a role here for regulators, but as noted by both Hopkins (2005) and Reason (1997) the commitment of an organisation's top managers to creating a safety culture is of key importance. Third, Reason (1997) notes the importance of having a learning culture. Fourth and finally, the importance of a flexible culture is recognised. Under this culture, decisions will be made by people best equipped to make them, for example engineers rather than managers who may have little technical knowledge. Antonsen (2009b) argues the importance of also considering the influence of power when researching safety (see also Perrow, 1999) as, for example, the views of managers towards safety is one from the top, and not the only, or necessarily correct, view. Further, Maslen and Hopkins (2014) note that organisations may concentrate their efforts on reducing major incidents affecting many people, one of the 'unintended consequences' of often well-meaning incentive schemes used by leaders to attempt to improve safety. However, Vaughan (1996) notes the importance of not reducing the issue to one of a dichotomy of 'good' engineers and 'bad' managers.

By comparison with Reason's (1997) cultural practices which aid in the development of a safety culture, Hopkins (2005) notes four cultural practices that impede the development of a culture of safety. The first of these is a rule-focused culture, with a 'pronounced tendency to blame' (2005: 28). With a rule-focused culture, rules are in place to ensure that someone can be blamed and punished if something goes wrong, with blame passed on to the individual to protect the organisation. Rules can deaden awareness of risk, as people are aware of the rule but not the danger that it seeks to control. A second culture is one of punctuality and on-time running, a side effect of which is to undermine safety

by demoting its importance as compared to production (see also Antonsen, 2009a). Third, there may be a risk-blind, or even risk-denying culture. Risk-blindness indicates a lack of awareness of risk, whereas to deny risk shows some awareness of it. In a culture of risk denial, the situation is assumed to be safe unless there is conclusive evidence to the contrary. Finally, and perhaps most importantly when considering divisions across contractual status and organisational boundaries, is a culture of silos where a company is 'organisationally and occupationally fragmented' (Hopkins, 2005: 28). This leads to job demarcation and an attitude that 'it's not my job', with secrecy, non-cooperation, restricted communication and antagonism between silos. Almklov and Antonsen (2010) also note the control issues created where additional barriers are created by outsourcing some functions. Importantly, as previously noted, silos can be created by differentiating workers based on whether they are core or temporary, or when some are engaged by an agency, with lack of clarity over who is responsible for them across organisational boundaries (Howes, 2011; Rubery et al., 2002).

In this context, the key contribution of this article is to investigate differences in OHS outcomes for people employed as core, directly-employed temporary, and agency workers, and the influence of safety culture on these differing groups. In order to achieve this, Hopkins (2006) notes that there are three ways to investigate safety cultures – through culture surveys, major accident enquiries or ethnography (or an ethnographically informed approach). It is the last of these approaches used by this study.

## Methodology

As reviewed above, a number of quantitative studies have been conducted investigating the potential link between contractual status and OHS (Quinlan, 2003; Quinlan et al., 2001). However, the increasingly complex relationship between worker and employer, particularly when considering agency workers, requires in-depth qualitative investigation in order to understand the workplace experiences of those at the margins (as also noted by Taylor et al., 2010; Thompson, 2011). As such, this article investigates worker experiences and OHS in the UK food manufacturing industry using in-depth qualitative research. The unit of analysis for this study is the food manufacturing sector, and the study draws upon data from five different organisations, details of which are presented in Table 1. The five companies, respectively a chocolate factory, brewery, ready meals factory, herb and spice packer and poultry processor, are identified throughout this article as ChocCo, BeerCo, ReadyCo, SpiceCo and TurkeyCo.

In total, 88 semi-structured interviews were conducted, held with 32 operations and first line managers, 12 HR managers, 14 permanent workers, 16 directly-employed temporary workers, 12 agency workers and 2 trade union representatives. These interviewees were selected so as to give a representative view of managers, and also core, directly-employed temporary and agency workers. Throughout the rest of this article, those workers employed directly by one of the case study companies on a temporary basis are referred to as 'temporary', whereas those who work through an agency are denoted 'agency'. Great care was taken to ensure that the sample selected at each case study company was comparable with the wider workforce at each site in terms of gender, ethnicity, age and other demographics. Interviews were held with trade union representatives at BeerCo and TurkeyCo, the only

**Table 1.** Descriptive data for the five companies.

	ChocCo	BeerCo	ReadyCo	SpiceCo	TurkeyCo
Number of permanent manufacturing workers	1000	600	350	80	1200
Max. number of directly-employed temporary manufacturing workers	400	50	0	0	600
Max. number of agency manufacturing workers	100	0	150	15	0
Pay differential for directly-employed workers	+3%	N/A	+5%	+2%	N/A
Agency workers sourced from	A8, local	N/A	A8, local	A8	Portugal (internal agency)
Typical length of short-term work	Up to 6 months	Up to 9 months	Weekly	Monthly	6–8 weeks
Approx. trade union membership amongst permanent workers	None	98%	None	None	30%
Examples of alternative PPE for agency workers	Overalls, shoes	N/A	Overalls, wellingtons, hats	Overalls	Overalls, wellingtons, hats

PPE = personal protective equipment.

two of the five companies to recognise a trade union, the effect of which on health and safety has been noted by Robinson and Smallman (2006) and Gunningham (2008).

These interviews were supplemented by observation of between two and four weeks at each site, which allowed for views presented in the interviews to be compared with interactions in both production and recreational areas. A number of shorter, informal interviews were also conducted during the observation period. OHS representatives were informally interviewed where present. Each organisation had a preferred external agency, except TurkeyCo, which ran its own agency in Portugal. Importantly, representatives from external employment agencies were not found at any of the sites during the observation period, and so no informal interviews were held with them. Additionally, data were gathered from safety reports at each company. Induction programmes for new starters were attended and, where provided, documentary evidence from these sessions was gathered. Notably, BeerCo was the only company at which the author was given any kind of safety induction before entering the factory. This was a requirement for any long-term visitor to the site.

## Context

The food manufacturing industry presents a particularly interesting unit of analysis in which to investigate workplace experiences of OHS for core, temporary and agency workers. In the context of a wider shift of risk from capital to labour (Thompson, 2003,

2011), risk of variable demand has been passed down the supply chain in food manufacturing. Organisations must be considered in a wider context rather than as disconnected entities, and the supply chain holds a critical role in the safety of workers. Greasley and Edwards (2014) find that, even where organisations and managers are committed to health and well-being interventions, competitive markets can constrain the impacts of these interventions. Turnbull et al. (1993) note that the power disparity in supply chains enables firms to transfer costs and risk to smaller suppliers, with Grimshaw et al. (2005) noting that these supplier firms will then attempt to transfer this risk onto their individual workers, which has been noted in a variety of sectors including haulage (Mayhew and Quinlan, 2006) and shipping (Bhattacharya and Tang, 2012). In some cases, this imbalance of power can be seen as having a positive effect on safety, with larger purchasers in the supply chain requiring suppliers to meet their standards (Marchington and Vincent, 2004), although these effects may be reduced during times of economic contraction (Robinson, 2010). In the particular case of the food manufacturing sector, this area has recently seen controversy related to interactions between the component organisations of the supply chains, as seen in the horsemeat scandal in the UK, which saw traces of horse found in ready meals claiming to contain beef (*The Guardian*, 2013).

In the particular case of the food manufacturing sector, Lloyd and James (2008) in the UK, Hasle and Moller (2007) in Denmark and Wright and Lund (2003) in Australia note that the financial risk of variable demand is often passed on through the use of agency workers. As such, the food manufacturing sector provides a suitable arena for investigating the experiences of these workers, and the relationships and potential silos created between the constituent companies in supply chains. Edwards et al. (2009) have noted the cost pressure placed on suppliers by increasingly consolidated and powerful supermarkets in the UK, particularly on suppliers of generic and substitutable products (see also Newsome et al., 2009). This power has led to increased focus on meeting production targets to meet the demands of supermarkets on time. Grimshaw et al. (2005) suggest that a cost-cutting response to this increased pressure from powerful purchasers is the use of precarious workers, such as those from an agency, transferring risk firstly from powerful supermarkets onto suppliers, and from these suppliers onto individual workers. This use of agency workers across organisational boundaries opens the possibility for silos to develop. Lloyd and James (2008) suggest that these pressures from further down the supply chain have an effect on health and safety in the food manufacturing industry, with Wright and Lund (1996) noting that these workers may attempt to work faster in order to impress managers and secure permanent employment, potentially at their own risk.

## Outcomes

This increased use of temporary and agency workers has potential effects on health and safety at work, particularly if the four cultural practices noted by Hopkins (2005) are present, for example individuals being placed into differing organisational silos based on contractual status. Although Hopkins's (2005) identification of a culture of on-time running is a literal one taken from railways in Australia, there is a focus in food manufacturing on meeting production targets and supplying supermarkets on time. On-time delivery here can be considered a form of on-time running. Given the high incidence of temporary

and agency work in the food manufacturing sector, and the transference of risk away from supermarkets down the supply chain, safety in this sector provides a particularly interesting study. According to the most recently published figures from the HSE, 27 million working days were lost to work-related ill-health or injury in the UK in 2012/2013, at an estimated cost of £13.8 billion (HSE, 2013b). Although in 2012/2013 around 10% of the British workforce were to be found in manufacturing, this sector accounts for 16% of reported major injuries, and 18% of fatal injuries (HSE, 2013a). Between 2007/2008 and 2010/2011, 38% of over three-day injuries in manufacturing were a result of handling incidents, with the next common cause being slips and trips at 19% (HSE, 2013a). Within the manufacturing sector, food manufacturing has the largest number of reported major injuries with 715 reported on average each year, at an average rate of 239.9 injuries per 100,000 employees (HSE, 2013a). The large number of people employed in food product and beverage manufacturing means that this was the sector with the highest reported non-fatal major injury figure, with the average annual number from 2005/2006 to 2009/2010 being 908 (HSE, 2011). When investigating overall health, the HSE reports that each year around 19,000 workers in food and drink manufacturing suffer from a health complaint that is exacerbated by work (HSE, 2014b). The HSE also notes that the second most common cause of ill-health in food and drink manufacture, after back injuries at 35%, is mental ill-health at 29% (HSE, 2014b). This is perhaps indicative of the repetitive nature of jobs in the sector, with low levels of control at work linked to stress and poor mental health (Karasek, 1979; Marmot et al., 1991).

## Findings

As would be expected for the sector, the majority of roles in the case study companies were monotonous and routine, requiring only for an operator to place some sort of food product into a container. General training for workers in these roles, regardless of their contractual status, was limited. The only exception to this was BeerCo, which had a more complicated production process that required workers to be able to work a number of different parts of the line. As a result, there were greater returns to be made by investing in training for individuals, and both core and temporary workers were directly employed, rather than through an agency. A temporary worker at BeerCo noted that there had been a number of training sessions beyond initial training that he had been able to attend:

Forklift training, then there is all your little stacker truck training so there is always something going on. You have all your little meetings where you have your health and safety, PPE training, environmental training, you have meetings where you have to do little quizzes on environmental issues, waste, so there is always something that you are taking part in ... I have done a few courses, I have done videojet [coding system for best before dates, batch numbers, etc.] training, I have done IOSH training, I have got certificates for quite a few of them, manual handling, there must be six or seven courses ... The team leader who was over there he said 'I can't see the point of you not doing the training while you're here, it is only going to be beneficial isn't it?' (Interview 24 – British temporary worker, male, 40s, BeerCo)

At BeerCo, workers did not have to apply to go on these courses, but instead were nominated by their managers. There was little evidence of workers being placed in different

silos based upon their contractual status, and all worked for the same organisation, again increasing communication and cooperation, and reducing antagonism. This inclusion in training helped to remove the barriers between temporary and core permanent workers:

You did all your pasteurisation and things like that, learning about salmonella in the food industry, and what diseases can cause health scares. They were like awareness courses really, but you still had to sign to say that you had done it and understood it. You had questions as well which were multiple choice and you ticked them. So you were still all involved in that just like the regular blokes were, you had to do these little courses ... You do all that sort of thing, team bonding, they don't shut you out ... So you are involved in that as well, you are not just pushed aside, 'You are just a fixed-term worker so you don't need to know', you still do everything that a full-time bloke does, any courses that they attend you are obliged to attend, so we do get everything that the full-term workers do. (Interview 24 – British temporary worker, male, 40s, BeerCo)

For these directly-employed temporary workers, some of the barriers to training had been removed, reducing the chance of workers on different contractual statuses feeling that they were in different silos. However, one significant distinction that remained, even in the strongly unionised BeerCo, was that temporary workers were much less likely to be members of the trade union. This lower level of membership has been found in many previous studies (Ackers et al., 1996; Gunningham, 2008), although there is occasional evidence of the successful organising of contingent workers (Simms and Dean, 2013). In light of these findings, it becomes increasingly important to investigate workplace experiences, particularly for workers who are completing the same tasks, but are engaged through an employment agency. This will be seen in the other case study companies, who employed agency as well as directly-employed temporary workers. As compared to the well-integrated BeerCo, the use of agency workers in these four organisations demonstrated Hopkins's (2005: 28) culture of silos and were found to be 'organisationally and occupationally fragmented'.

### *Safety at work*

At the remaining case study companies greater differences were found between directly-employed and agency workers. All of the sites visited reported similar types of safety incidents within their factories, mainly slips, trips and falls, and cuts from equipment or packaging. These safety incidents are typical of those found in the food manufacturing industry (see, for example, HSE, 2011), although TurkeyCo had the additional concern of H5N1 avian influenza which had affected a different part of their supply chain in 2007. Cuts were a particular problem at TurkeyCo, where many of the workers used knives, and as these became worn down through repeated sharpening there was a higher risk of the point going through a worker's protective chain mail and injuring them. Although new blades were too wide to penetrate this chain mail, it was difficult for workers to know at what stage of sharpening the blade would become narrow enough to injure them, and thus they were sometimes injured before they requested a new knife. However, these were considered to be minor injuries, both by workers and managers. There had not been a fatality at any of the plants for many years. Reflecting wider trends (HSE, 2014b),

injury rates were falling, although there was some fluctuation, and different groups, particularly younger workers and agency workers, were felt by OHS specialists interviewed to present a higher level of risk. Importantly, however, many of these minor injuries are preventable with basic safety induction training, as this overcomes the problems of lack of familiarity with the work environment (Lloyd and James, 2008) and lack of knowledge of reporting systems (Aronsson, 1999; Johnstone and Quinlan, 2006).

Overall, managers' views towards whether permanent, directly-employed temporary, or agency workers were more likely to have a safety incident were found to be inconsistent. Some operations managers suggested that temporary or agency workers were more likely to have a safety incident than their permanent colleagues because they were not used to their surroundings. However, others suggested that it was in fact more likely that permanent workers would have a safety incident, as their familiarity with their work environment meant that they could become complacent and thus less wary of hazards. Discussions with OHS representatives revealed that at none of the sites visited were incident reports distinguished by a worker's contractual status, and thus it is not possible to provide any meaningful statistics from these case study companies on whether temporary or agency workers are more likely to have a safety incident in the particular case of the food manufacturing sector in the UK. The lack of availability of this information may, however, explain some of the variation in findings in existing quantitative studies. As no sites differentiated their reports by contractual status it is likely that the data used for quantitative studies into the issue of health and safety of short-term workers (for example those reviewed by Quinlan, 2003; Quinlan et al., 2001) are unreliable.

### *A culture of silos: Safety of directly-employed workers*

Induction training was often found to be patchy at the case study companies and, importantly, differing levels of training were given to workers on different types of work contract. As would perhaps be expected for the low skilled roles investigated at each case study company, there was little in the way of extensive training for new starters. Although permanent workers received by far the longest workplace induction, even they found that their induction did not provide basic information, such as the location of fire escapes:

I wasn't sure where the fire exits were. I think I asked a line manager and he said 'If there is a fire just follow me'.

*[Interviewer: When you started was there any safety training?]*

Oh no, no, you've just got to put the hat and the blue shoes on. You have just got to wear that and wash your hands, and that was it. You are on a line, just get on with it. (Interview 17 – British permanent worker, male, 50s, ChocCo)

A number of permanent workers across the sites expressed concern with the level of safety training that was being given. This is perhaps surprising, given not only the importance of safety training to the individual, but also to protect the integrity of the product, particularly following high profile incidents such as H5N1 avian influenza and the horse-meat scandal. Mirroring the situation for core permanent workers, for directly-employed temporary workers any safety training given was felt to be inadequate:

There was one girl who was my best mate on the line who did induction with me, we would just take the piss out the thing because it was so patronising. They all are, that sort of thing, it is not just ours, all of them are. There was questions like ‘What do you do if you have just wiped your backside? Do you (a) pick up the chocolate (b) shake someone’s hand or (c) wash your hand?’ And we were sat taking the mickey out of it, so that is how we met. (Interview 13 – British temporary worker, male, 20s, ChocCo)

As noted with ongoing training, little difference was found between induction training for directly-employed core and temporary workers. Despite the obvious concerns over the effects of a lack of initial safety training, it would seem from investigating these two types of training that the divisions between core and directly-employed temporary workers employed by these organisations were not significant and barriers between these silos were not large. However, by investigating agency workers, it becomes clear that new divisions in training provision between directly-employed and agency workers have formed. Demonstrated here are organisationally fragmented workplaces where people work together but for different organisations, leading to a culture of silos (Hopkins, 2005) that blurs clarity of responsibility (Rubery et al., 2002).

### *A culture of silos: Safety of agency workers*

Safety training at induction was found to be different for directly-employed and agency workers in all the case study companies. For example, at SpiceCo, agency workers received around one hour of induction, whereas permanent workers would have around four hours of induction. Agency staff would be given a quick overview of the changing procedure and how to report any incidents, and would then go to the production line to be given on-the-job training. By comparison, permanent workers were taken to a training room and shown videos about food safety and pests, and would then receive a tour around the factory before they started. ReadyCo exhibited perhaps the largest difference between inductions for permanent and agency staff. Permanent workers would receive a three to four hour induction in a separate training room. If necessary to the department that they were working in, new starters would also be shown videos about allergens. Agency staff, by contrast, received no company induction, with some operations managers not sure who was responsible for safety training for new starters:

*[Interviewer: So when the people get to you have the agency given them any food safety training or induction?]*

I would think the agency would have, I can’t be a hundred percent sure on that. (Interview 40 – British operations manager, male, 40s, ReadyCo)

*[Interviewer: Do they go through any kind of formal induction process?]*

Not with me or us, I don’t know if they do with the actual agency company. Their representative will take them down there, they will show them the PPE [personal protective equipment] and wash hands and everything so it is more their responsibility to make sure they know what they are doing. (Interview 49 – British operations manager, male, 40s, ReadyCo)

This demonstrates Hopkins's (2005) culture of rules, where procedures are in place and workers are held responsible if these are not followed or if, as the second manager states, they do not know what they are doing. The confusion over responsibility matches the findings of an HSE report cited by Johnstone and Quinlan (2006), which showed that 80% of agencies believed that responsibility for workplace health and safety lay with the host organisation and not the agency. As noted by Howes (2011), it is unclear even legally who is responsible for this training. However, it was clear that in these cases the agency did not always provide a safety induction:

The actual agency should provide them with all the knowledge that they need, for example what they can and cannot do in the areas, when they come in they change into boots and they have to wear hairnets, they have to wear beard things and things like that. The agency should do that, but we have a problem sometimes when they say that all the guys on the bus have been told about what they need to do, and they come to the area and they go into it, and they haven't got a clue. They haven't got a clue what to do. You find that quite a lot of the agency that we have, most of the Polish and Slovenian and Estonian and Slovakian, a lot of them have not so great English. They come and they say 'We don't know what to do, we don't know what we are supposed to wear', and you see someone walking through the changing rooms and stepping over the step over, and walking through without a hairnet on, you are like 'Whoa, come back'. (Interview 55 – British operations manager, male, 30s, ReadyCo)

By relying on the agency to complete the safety induction, it was clear that agency workers were being put in danger. In addition, with a lack of information provided about, for example, hand-washing, consumers of these products could also be placed at risk. Importantly, it was not possible to find any representatives from the agency to discuss this with at the case study companies, perhaps indicative of some of the problems faced by agency workers when engaged in a triangular employment relationship. All of the agency workers spoken to, regardless of which company they were working at, indicated that they felt that their safety inductions were inadequate. For example, at ReadyCo the agency workers reported that they just copied what permanent workers were doing, as described by this line leader who had originally started as an agency worker:

*[Interviewer: Because this was a food factory did the agency give you any extra training?]*

No.

*[Interviewer: So when you got here what health and safety training did you get?]*

When I was working for the agency they didn't give me any training, someone just told you I need to wash the hands, and put on the PPE.

*[Interviewer: Who told you what to do with hand-washing?]*

Some permanent people. When I came here I had to sit in the canteen with all the agency people, and someone from the agency came and said 'You and you go to this department, and you and you go to this department'. So I was with the people who went to the assembly department. When I go there I look what they are doing and I do the same. (Interview 50 – Polish line leader, male, 30s, ReadyCo)

Agency workers were supposed to receive safety training from their agency, and it was part of their contract with the case study companies that this would be completed. However, when speaking to the agency workers about their experiences, it became clear that this was not the case:

*[Interviewer: What safety training did you get before you started?]*

Safety?

*[Interviewer: Like emergency stop buttons or how to lift things or where the fire exits are.]*

No.

*[Interviewer: You didn't get anything like that?]*

No. (Interview 20 – Polish agency worker, female, 20s, ChocCo)

*[Interviewer: Because you were working in a food factory rather than at [warehouse] did you get any extra training from the agency?]*

No, we got some training in [other company's] warehouse where we also worked from the agency, and one of the companies give us extra training in food safety.

*[Interviewer: But the agency themselves didn't?]*

No.

*[Interviewer: And was there any food safety training when you got here?]*

No. (Interview 57 – Polish agency worker, female, 20s, SpiceCo)

It was agency workers who were most disconnected from the organisations at which they worked, and who received the shortest induction and, with the exception of ChocCo, were not given a company induction. Indeed, at each factory the case study organisations were attempting to increase the differentiation of their agency workers from their directly-employed workers. As an example, agency workers at ReadyCo were given bright orange hairnets to distinguish them from white hatted directly-employed workers. Workers who took a job through an agency reported that they were often given different personal protective equipment (PPE) to the permanent or directly-employed temporary workers. In many cases, this was not felt to offer the same levels of protection as that given to directly-employed workers. For example, at ChocCo agency workers were provided with blue plastic overshoes rather than white protective shoes with steel toe caps. These were felt to provide less protection, and also to increase the possibility of a slip or fall as they did not provide as much grip. Unlike permanent workers, agency workers at ReadyCo would share communal wellington boots rather than being provided with their own new pair, and the soles on these boots were sometimes worn down and slippery. Again, managers were aware that these did not provide as much protection even though they were working in a high risk area, but that owing to cost pressures and ordering delays, these workers did not have safety shoes:

They are given shoes straightaway. Well, maybe not on the first day because you need to find their shoe size and order them and it takes a week. But they are given them because they are

working in an area that is more susceptible to risk. (Interview 7 – British operations manager, male, 40s, ChocCo)

Demonstrated here, therefore, is not just a culture of risk-blindness, but a risk-denying culture (Hopkins, 2005). Managers were aware that the protective equipment that they were providing did not afford as much protection to agency workers, but in an attempt to separate them into a different workplace silo, continued to do this anyway.

### *The diversity of agency workers*

As noted previously, the agency workforce is becoming increasingly diverse. In the UK, a particular factor that has affected this has been migration, particularly from Central and Eastern Europe (Clark and Drinkwater, 2008) following the A8 EU expansion of 2004. As such, the language barrier was a significant issue with agency workers. Whereas directly-employed staff would have to prove that they understood English to an acceptable level in a job interview, workers with poor English language skills would often use the agency as a route around this when seeking work (see also Hopkins B, 2009). This meant that managers had to show workers visually rather than explain safety procedures to them verbally. Alternatively, some managers used other bilingual workers to translate for them or, if they were from the same country as the new starter, explain to them in their native language. Perhaps of most concern, operations managers were aware that these workers' language skills could impact on their safety, but had done nothing to resolve the issue.

*[Interviewer: You've never had someone turn up whose English is not good enough to understand the Health and Safety?]*

Probably yes. *[Laughs]* But the agency staff, you find that they have worked in a lot of other factories, so they have worked at [local chicken factory] or somewhere else and they have picked things up along the way. (Interview 1 – British operations manager, female, 40s, ChocCo)

Again here is the demonstration of a risk-denying culture, and not just one of risk-blindness. Overall, agency workers were certainly aware that they were the most disconnected of workers in the factories. In addition to being marked out with different PPE, which often did not provide the safety levels of that given to directly-employed workers, they also received less stability with regard to working hours, and also received lower pay. The case study organisations gave them a shorter induction, and they were excluded from a company induction designed to improve their commitment, unless they were at ChocCo, where they were expected to attend this for no pay. Overall, inductions were found to be lacking; where centrally designed programmes were in place, these were often found to be puerile, and the output pressures placed on line managers meant that they had no time to complete safety inductions with a workforce with a rapid turnover. These operations managers were certainly aware that there were weaknesses in the process, from migrant workers who did not understand the induction, to agencies who were not providing the inductions that they were supposed to. In this way, they demonstrated not just a blindness to risk, but an active denial of risk. Perhaps most importantly for these manufacturing managers was the culture of on-time running and delivery, where

requirements to meet production deadlines from powerful supermarkets were seen as the key priority. Increased pressure from supermarkets was concentrated on output levels rather than workplace safety, and thus this was the key focus for increasingly time-pressured operations managers (see also Lloyd and James, 2008; Newsome et al., 2009). With this increased use of agency workers to cope with these pressures, divisions in these case study companies were found where people were doing the same tasks, but with some directly-employed by the manufacturer and others by an agency. Here, where it was unclear who was responsible for managing them, were workers given so little training that they were being put at risk.

## Discussion and conclusions

The influence of cultural practices on OHS can be examined through culture surveys, major accident enquiries, or ethnography (or an ethnographically informed approach) (Hopkins, 2006). In order to investigate the workplace experiences of people undertaking the same tasks but working on different contractual statuses, this article has used a qualitative in-depth approach as suggested by Taylor et al. (2010) and Thompson (2011). Although OHS is a crucial area, it has often been overlooked in the past in the literature. Quinlan (1999), for example, has noted that there is often a disconnect between sociologists and industrial relations scholars investigating labour markets, and the implications that these have on safety. Additionally, when questioning why it is necessary to 'bother' with workplace democracy, Foley and Polanyi (2006) note that, alongside the traditional arguments based in economics, citizenship and ethics, there is also a compelling case based on employee health. They argue that job security is related to both physical and psychological health (see also Dawson et al., 2014), and others such as Lloyd and James (2008), Quinlan et al. (2001) and Quinlan (2003) find that precarious work is a factor in workplace safety incidents. As such, the influence of contractual status on workplace experiences of OHS is an area that requires in-depth analysis, and this article has endeavoured to fill this research gap.

OHS outcomes were investigated by using an ethnographically informed method to examine differences in workplace experiences of core and temporary workers, and also the experiences of those working through an employment agency. When considering training provision, there was found to be little difference in the experiences of permanent and temporary workers who were directly employed by the case study companies. This might be expected – the majority of roles were low skilled and there were few production gains to be made through training as a result of the highly controlled production environment (Stewart, 1997). Where significant differences do occur is when agency workers are present. As noted in the literature on fragmenting organisational boundaries (Marchington and Vincent, 2004; Marchington et al., 2005; Rubery et al., 2002), individuals may find themselves completing tasks alongside people working for a different organisation. It is here, rather than at the boundary between directly-employed permanent and directly-employed temporary (Atkinson, 1985), that new workplace divisions are being created between directly-employed and agency workers.

The complexity of supply chains in the food manufacturing industry, coupled with the increased power of supermarkets, has seen the use of agency labour grow in the food manufacturing sector, with workers hired from agencies on a very short-term basis to

complete low skilled tasks (Edwards et al., 2009). However, the lines of responsibility for these workers are growing increasingly blurred, and responsibility for providing these workers with, for example, safety training is unclear (Howes, 2011). This article has demonstrated that managers within companies are unclear as to where this responsibility lies, and therefore it is at this boundary that workers are failing to receive the necessary induction, training or supervision. A further effect on safety of agency workers is the increasing diversity of this group. As would be expected in production roles, the skill requirements of jobs in the case study companies were low. Indeed, not even a basic level of English language skills was required to understand the task. This heterogeneity of the workforce, however, creates further problems for safety in the workplace, as agencies place workers who can be shown the task, but do not necessarily understand safety instructions. In addition, a deliberate attempt to differentiate agency workers often led to them receiving inferior PPE, also visually reinforcing this new division.

Clearly at these case study companies agency workers faced an increased level of risk. Indeed, managers indicated that they were aware of these problems. An analysis of organisational culture as expressed in the collective practices of managers and leaders illuminates why these organisations allow these problems to persist. By investigating the four cultural practices identified by Hopkins (2005), it is possible to analyse why these outcomes are accepted within these companies. Hopkins (2005) suggests that four key factors are responsible for the organisational culture that can lead to severe OHS issues – a rule-focused culture, a risk-blind or even risk-denying culture, a culture of punctuality and on-time running, and a culture of silos. These factors can be seen in a number of large-scale incidents – Hopkins (2005), for example, notes the examples of the Glenbrook and Ladbrooke Grove railway disasters, while Vaughan (1996) draws similar conclusions from the Challenger space shuttle disaster.

Rather than a major accident enquiry, however, this study sought to investigate the food manufacturing industry using an ethnographically informed method (Hopkins, 2006). Although no major incident had yet occurred in these organisations, the four cultures noted by Hopkins (2005) were all present. These were first a rule-focused culture, with an assumption that workers were responsible for their own safety within the rules that had been created. There was certainly evidence of a risk-blind or even risk-denying culture, where managers knew that the protective equipment that they provided to agency workers was not as effective, but continued with its use anyway. A culture of punctuality and on-time running meant a focus on production targets and delivering to customers on time above safety. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a culture of silos across organisational boundaries, coupled with the context of a weak legal framework of responsibility, meant that many of these workers simply received no safety supervision or training at all.

Through in-depth investigation, this study has been able to show the extent to which divisions in the workplace have shifted. When considering OHS, the division is not amongst directly-employed workers at the core and temporary boundary (Atkinson, 1985; Burgess, 1997; Quinlan, 1999); it is where workers have different employers that differences occur (Rubery et al., 2002), and the evidence from this study is that these differences are putting workers in low skilled roles at risk (see also Lloyd and James, 2008; Quinlan, 2003; Quinlan et al., 2001). Having illuminated this confusion in responsibility at a workplace level, it is now of crucial importance for policy makers to ensure

that this responsibility is clarified and that these agency workers receive the induction, equipment, training and supervision they require to ensure their safety in the workplace (Howes, 2011).

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