

The return of ‘labour-as-commodity’? The experience of casual work in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Statements about the role and function of casual work in giving both employees and employers ‘flexibility’ are common in Australian public life. There is little systematic evidence to support these assertions. This qualitative study investigates whether casual workers are happy with being casually employed. It reveals that many casuals experience their terms as the pure commodification of their hourly labour, with a loss of control over their time, along with a loss of voice and respect at work. Many in the study would prefer more permanent conditions. While many casual workers like their *jobs*, they do not like their *casual terms*. The minority of casual workers who are positive about their casual terms enjoyed two key conditions: a backup source of income (from a parent, a partner or a pension) and a relationship of respectful reciprocal negotiation with their employer/supervisor.

Introduction: Commodified labour, precarious work and casual work in Australia

This article analyses new qualitative evidence about the experience of casual work by a group of casual workers in Australia in early 2004. It considers the nature of their experience, and whether it reveals a shift in the status of the casual worker to ‘labour-as-commodity’ through changes in their ability to voice views, their standing, their control and their change of having a say.

The extent to which labour is a commodity has long been a topic of debate amongst social scientists. The ILO rejected this notion in its founding charter, settling instead upon the proposition that ‘labour is not a commodity’ (Vosko, 2000:15). Recent analysis of changes in the labour market internationally, and growth in precarious forms of employment specifically, have revived the notion that labour is returning to the status of a commodity. This shift is represented by the erosion of regulatory arrangements and practices that recognised (and protected) embodied labour power in the person of a free citizen, one who exercises agency (including a voice, the change of workplace exit and resistance). Analysing the growth in temporary employment in Canada, Vosko argues that

labourpower is inevitably a commodity under capitalism, and the decline of security and freedom in the wage relation accentuates its commodity status (2000:15).

She argues that erosion of labour regulation, as reflected in the growth of temporary employment in Canada, is producing a return to commodified labour.

In Australia, the rejection of the pure commodification of labour in the twentieth century was reflected in the notion of a ‘living wage’ payable to sustain workers through periods when they were not working. Justice Higgins’ emblematic argument for this compared a labourer with a horse: even a horse needs hay when it cannot work; similarly ‘lusty men’ are entitled at least to food, clothes and shelter for them and their dependents ‘even when there is no work for them ... They also serve who only stand and wait’ (Commonwealth Arbitration Reports, 1914:53, cited in Mitchell, 1973:359 and quoted in Beasley, 1996:39). In Australia, the growth in casual employment, like the growth in temporary employment in Canada, represents a shift back towards treating labour as pure commodity, with a corresponding widespread perception amongst casual workers of losses affecting their control of their time, their ability to earn a living income, their capacity to reproduce or support dependents, their voice, the respect they are given at work and their ability to organise collectively.

There is a large and growing body of research about casual employment in Australia (Campbell, 2000; Campbell and Burgess, 2000; Junor, 2001; Kryger, 2004; Pocock, Buchanan and Campbell, 2004; Smith and Ewer, 1999; Wooden and Warren, 2003). This literature documents the growth in casual employment (along with growth in other forms of non-traditional employment), the industries and occupations in which it is concentrated, and some attributes of casual employees.

The common definition of casual employment in Australia includes employees who lack access to paid holiday and sick leave. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data show that the proportion of all employees who self-identify as casual workers or who lack paid leave was 27.9 percent in November 2001 (ABS Cat. No. 6359.0). This corresponds to HILDA survey data collected at the same time, estimating employees without leave entitlements at 27.4 percent. This is more than double the 13.3 percent level recorded in 1982 (Campbell, 2000:68). The proportion and absolute number of casual employees has thus grown quickly in the past two decades, outstripping the growth in ongoing employment (Campbell and Burgess, 2001:172; OECD, 2002).

Casual employees are more likely to be women and to be part-time (that is, employed less than 35 hours a week). Based on HILDA data, around a third of casuals are students at school or at university. They are concentrated in particular industries, especially the retail trade, and in accommodation, cafes and restaurants. In terms of occupations they are especially concentrated amongst elementary and intermediate clerical sales and service workers.

The study

Some large surveys give us a picture about some aspects of casual employment, and employee perspectives about their employment (Wooden and Warren, 2003). However, a comprehensive picture of the experience of casual work, from the perspective of employees, cannot be easily gleaned from large surveys asking closed questions and which conflate analysis of job satisfaction with views about employment terms. Further, issues like the nature of their preferences, the quality of their relationships, the connections between their work, health and family welfare and their workplace power are difficult to plumb using closed, limited-response survey questions. This qualitative study aims to fill this gap by evaluating the views of casual workers about their jobs and the casual form of employment, and exploring the impact of this upon them, their households and the larger community. Open-ended interviews allow unanticipated issues to surface, together with the exploration of their meanings and the clarification of respondents' views with follow-up questions.

The study is based on telephone interviews with 55 employees who have been recently, or are currently, employed casually. It assesses their overall views of casual work and its impact upon them. Interviewees include students, young people who are not students, middle-aged and older men and women, a range of occupations and industries, full-time and part-time workers, from New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria, and from the city and the country; long-term and short-term casuals, those undertaking ongoing tasks along with those providing short-term relief, in jobs ranging from less skilled to highly skilled work, those in the formal labour market and some in the 'black' labour force, and people living in various household structures, with and without partners and children. (Only some aspects of the full study are reported here, setting aside the effects of casual work on pay, training, unionism, health, social life, family and community, and welfare tax and superannuation. These are discussed in the full report of the study, 'Only a casual...' available at www.barbarapocock.com.au).

Our method of interviewee selection involved two stages. First, we generated a pool of 86 potential interviewees, from which we randomly selected 42 for interview with a view to generating a fair range by sex, age, industry, occupation, student status and so on. This first round of potential interviewees was recruited from newspaper advertisements and articles about the study, invitations to classes of university students, letters and handbills distributed to employers and community organisations, and ten names provided by four unions. Newspaper sources were the largest source of names. When our pool and sample showed up as under-representing young people and those in the retail sector, we initiated a second stage of selection, drawing a further group of 13 from a set of 50 randomly selected names supplied by a large union with a high proportion of young casual workers. The study was supported through ARC Discovery Grant DP0343368, a Small Grant from the University of Adelaide and a contribution towards transcription from the ACTU.

The interviewee group thus includes fair representation of men and women, students, and various occupations and industries. The group over-represents women, union members, and part-timers and under-represents students and labourers. Representation by industry and occupation is

good. The interviewed group is older than the ABS data suggest for the larger population of casual employees. While the age difference is significant, it is worth noting that growth in casual employment in recent years has been strong amongst prime-age and older Australians, especially men (Campbell, 2000).

Key policy questions arising from the literature

The literature in relation to casual employment is now substantial. Without canvassing its scope and detail here, this study offers evidence on three key questions emerging from that literature:

Are casuals really ongoing employees? Is 'true' insecurity exaggerated? Are casual jobs 'good' jobs or 'bad' jobs?

Existing data about casualisation in Australian document the long-term nature of many casual jobs. According to HILDA data the average tenure of casual employees is 2.6 years (Wooden and Warren, 2003:13), and ABS data shows that 54.7 percent of self-identified casual employees and those without leave entitlements in 2001 had been employed for more than a year (ABS cat. no. 6359.0). These data raise important questions. Are casual workers really in ongoing jobs, with benefits and conditions that mean they are, *de facto*, 'permanent' employees? Are casual jobs 'good' or 'bad' jobs, in terms of their pay and conditions as well as in other respects? We know relatively little about casual workers' evaluations of important aspects of their jobs (with the exception of Smith and Ewer, 1999). Wooden and Warren have argued, based on self-reported HILDA data, that 'non standard employment is not necessarily seen as undesirable by workers' (2003:26). However, Smith and Ewer conclude from their 1999 study (including 22 qualitative interviews and three focus groups) that whether casual work confers flexibility and meets employee preferences is 'open to question', pointing to the limited labour market options underpinning 'choice' for many casual employees, and the 'close nexus' between casual work and unemployment (1999:v).

Do casual jobs meet employee preferences for flexibility? Are they what workers want, especially what some groups of workers want?

Among others, the Minister for Workplace Relations has argued that casual workers dissatisfaction with their casual work is 'a myth' (Andrews, 2004). The minister asserted in 2003 that 'Most people who do casual work are happy to be doing it either because they like the extra pay that casual workers get or they like the freedom and flexibility and the flexible hours that casual work provides' (Andrews, 2003).

Are casual jobs a pathway to better jobs, and to ongoing work?

If casual work is a means to ongoing employment, efforts to restrict it or change its regulatory environment may be penalising casual workers by restricting employment growth (Tsumori, 2004). Some studies suggest that casual work lead to ongoing employment, although experiences vary significantly between groups (Chalmers and Kalb, 2001). Kryger has found a consistent relationship between higher levels of casual work and higher levels of unemployment and underemployment. This leads him to suggest that casual work is less a preferred option, and more an alternative to unemployment (Kryger, 2004).

Overall views of casual work: positive, ambivalent, negative

Overall, three views of casual work are evident amongst the 55 interviewees in this study: positive, ambivalent and reluctant. About a quarter were generally positive about being casually employed. A smaller group were ambivalent. A much larger group were negative. We call these 'reluctant casuals' because they did not like, and some hated, their casual terms of employment. Those who are positive about being casual are more likely to be working students or carers with family responsibilities: like Chelsea and Donna – but even many of these 'positives' name downsides:

It's good and flexible if you have study at the university things change every semester and you're able to adjust when you're working around timetable changes so you don't have to be locked into only be available certain days which a lot of people experience on contracts. However, it is also a pain not knowing sometimes when you're going to be working and sometimes even getting shifts that aren't appropriate.... (Chelsea, 20, retail worker)

... as a mum with children, I need to do casual work because my children are sick quite a lot and the work that I've got at the moment is two days a week. It's fairly set but it's still on a casual basis. But it means that if my kids are sick and I need to stay home, I won't feel guilty about it. If I was permanent part-time or full-time, a) I'd feel guilty about taking time off for my children and b) I think I'd be more likely to lose my job for doing so. (Donna, 41, reception clerk)

All of those who were positive were part-time. Only one older man held a positive assessment, while five of the 13 are relatively young or students. Some young students need control over their working patterns, as do some older women with dependents who need predictability of income and hours. Two factors are strongly associated with positive views about casual terms. The first of these is other 'back-up' sources of income: most lived in a household where additional income was provided by a parent, a partner or a pension. The second is a good relationship with supervisors, that ensured reciprocal negotiation and a real say over working time. Both of these hold for most casuals who are positive. When employees are highly dependent upon their casual earnings, and when they have little effective say over their work patterns, negative assessments are common.

Satisfaction with casual work is also associated with certain stages in the life cycle (as when studying, caring or semi-retired). Some who are positive about their casual work in retirement say that this form of employment would not have suited them when they had dependents or a mortgage. At present, casual work often implicitly requires that earnings are either supplementary or fitted to certain life-cycle stages. However, casual terms are increasingly being extended to, and imposed upon, workers where these circumstances do not apply. Based on this study, it is therefore simply not true to say that most casuals prefer to be casual.

Casual workers clearly distinguish between what they are looking for from part-time work, and what they get through casual work. Many casuals enjoy their jobs. They prefer a job to unemployment. However, they distinguish their assessments of their *jobs*, from their view of *casual terms*. The significance of an analytical separation of general job satisfaction measures from views about employment terms is clear. Casual workers enjoy caring for people, using their skills, and making social connections through their work. However, these assessments are quite independent of their views about the nature of their employment form in many cases. For example, George has nothing positive to say about his ten years in casual employment: it has seriously affected his health, his household and his life. While he takes pride and pleasure in his work, its casual terms drive him to thoughts of suicide. Similarly, Bruce loves driving his bus for disabled children. He takes pride in his relationships with the children and his care of them. Yet he considers being a casual unfair and poorly rewarded. Alice has worked for many years as a word-processing operator, work that she enjoys and does well. However, she has just changed jobs (and given up being casual) in order to be better treated and properly classified. Casual work consists of many aspects. Studies of satisfaction need to distinguish these aspects if they are to assess casual work terms accurately.

What people do not like about being casual

Explanations for negative views are multi-faceted. They include the unpredictable nature of working hours, days and income; the need to be 'on tap'; the ways in which casual work makes people feel peripheral to the workplace and community and 'like a dishrag' or 'a stone kicked down the road'; the negative effects of this status on their households and social life and the fact that they cannot easily take a holiday or be sick. Issues of respect and exclusionary treatment emerge strongly in casual workers' assessments of their work. Long-term casuals are especially negative about being casually employed:

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 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. (Alice, 43, word-processor operator, engineering industry)

Flexibility for whom?

Casual work is flexible. But in this study flexibility appears to benefit the employer rather than the casual employee. Forty-two percent of interviewees felt they have some flexibility in their jobs: to ask for holidays or to change their hours, for example. Many value this flexibility highly. However, more than half feel that they have no flexibility. Instead, their working lives are often determined at very short notice. Losing shifts or working hours is frequently mentioned as a consequence of knocking back work. Their inflexible working arrangements ask a lot of them as employees, but confer them with little control. Their paid labour is closely matched to production demands, in a classic indicator of labour commodification. Many are aware of the irony in this situation, and some believe that it enables bosses to avoid legal obligations:

Oh, I think they have the attitude that we're disposable and if we, you know, if they're not happy with us then they just don't give us another shift. (Patti, 44, security officer/labour hire)

Many employees value flexibility that enables them to predict and control when they will work, at what times of day, for how long and how often and when they will start and finish working. It often does not. It is clear that the exercise of a real say over working time is very variable amongst casual workers and is very dependent upon having good relationships with supervisors. While both Tony and Sue are 'positive' casuals, their relationships are key to this assessment, although not without some ambivalence in Sue's case:

When there's work and they want me, they love me, love me like a rash, and when there's no work, I don't exist. They don't even want to talk to me. I could ring up all I like, if there's no work, they're not interested. (Sue, 33, hospital nurse)

I enjoy actually being a casual at the moment. It gives me the ability to work whatever hours I wish. It gives me slightly higher pay rate which works out at around about two dollars an hour better. And it gives me the flexibility. To be able to move in or move out and take the time off when I really need it. And it doesn't give me that added pressure with bills I can take the time off much easier At the moment, I can go in and say [to my boss], look, I need next week off for such and such and such And she will just roster me off. Save shifts for me for when I come back. (Tony, 40s, nursing home carer)

The preference for permanence

Contrary to the assertion that casual work meets employee preferences, most casual employees in this study would prefer permanent employment. This includes many who have some flexibility and say in their casual work patterns. They would prefer permanent work to achieve integration in the workplace, for the chance for training and promotion, for more recognition for what they do, and for less vulnerability to arbitrary dismissal or the loss of working hours. This preference for permanence is strong across all the groups in this study. Furthermore, many part-time employees would prefer ongoing part-time work to casual terms.

Many have sought to convert to ongoing conditions, some with success. Their motivations are varied: to get respect, for a predicable income, to reduce worry about losing hours or the job itself, to avoid instant dismissal, to have a paid holiday, to be able to be sick without losing income, to have better protection if they are injured and to accumulate decent superannuation. Some have used their initial casual work to get ongoing casual work or permanent employment. For others, reverse is true: their ready availability has merely allowed their employers to retain them on casual terms:

Employers see it as a vast reservoir of employees. If this one doesn't work out, you get another one. So I don't think it is an opportunity for advancement at all. (Kenneth, 49, manufacturing)

In some cases, their growing experience and skill base has made their prospects for permanency less likely, rather than more, as they become eligible for higher levels of classification and pay (where internal labour markets of this type exist and are available to casuals). This creates a ghetto for some, or a trapdoor into unemployment for others. In some workplaces the systems for allocating permanent jobs are arbitrary or unfair:

We have had several instances where our employer's taken people on full-time and I've missed out The first time was when the permanent people voted for who they'd like to be made full-time. I was working actually [in an area] where I didn't have a lot of interaction with the majority of the workforce at the time so I missed out on that job by three votes. (George, 40s, technician)

Many casuals support the idea of a right to convert to ongoing terms after a period as a casual. However, the process of becoming permanent can be hazardous:

I actually asked my supervisor twice and both times she rejected it. The last time the union asked and they were rejected too. And then all of a sudden these accusations were coming out that I supposedly said, and that's when my hours got dropped and so a couple of weeks after that I left. (Abby, 30s, cleaner)

Respect

Their treatment emerges as a very significant aspect of casual experience at work. While a few casuals feel they are treated the same as the permanent workers, others feel they are treated very differently from them. Most commonly, they mention a lack of respect. Being 'only a casual' is being less than a proper worker, whatever commitment they make to their work. A number of interviewees also feel they are abused at work. In some cases there is a general feeling of being left 'out of the loop' and of being ignored. Some interviewees feel that they are bullied, and that their workplace injuries were ignored or dismissed:

It comes back to the respect thing again. You're working harder to try and earn that respect. You're trying harder to prove yourself That whole nine years, I was still trying to earn respect.... (Rachel, 40s, cashier government and labour hire)

Because not only have you got the stress of the frequency of the work and the moment's notice and stuff, but the work environment itself and the culture. I wasn't being treated well at either of those places and my confidence really went down and you know, it was really, really taxing I was just depressed and stressed and because both these jobs, I was starting out as a waitress and they're telling me how stupid I was, and telemarketing, every single day telling you you're going to lose your job to the whole group. And because I've got a really solid work ethic that really crushed me ... (Sarah, 24, student waitress and telemarketer)

Marginalisation of casual workers takes many forms, from not being asked to the Christmas party or picnic day, to missing out on training and promotion and workplace communication. This matters a *great* deal to casual workers.

Casual work: 'a way of being the bully'

For many casual workers their direct supervisor was very important. Some have very good bosses, who look after them, send them flowers when they are sick and give them compensating shifts when they have been ill. But many feel vulnerable to the whims and character of their supervisor. As a result, casuals work hard to 'manage upwards' and keep relationships 'sweet'. They are careful not to refuse work when it is offered. Falling out with a permanent co-worker or with a supervisor can have disastrous implications:

I think it depends then on how good a negotiator you are, and how good your employer is. When I was working in the service station, our employer ran a family business and he was pretty supportive and I would assume that if he was still running the place then, he would have quite happily converted us to permanent employment. Other employers ... like to have the total control of the casual where they can hire and fire at will without this threat of having to pay severance pay or unfair dismissal encroaching their power, which seems to be a big concern to employers. (William, 44, call centre operator)

Countering workplace bullying is especially problematic when individual power is weak. Many examples were given of the exercise of arbitrary power against casual workers and the loss of so many hours of work that employment was effectively, though not formally, terminated. The threat of repercussions dogs the working day of many casual employees:

As a casual worker someone else has got the power ... how many hours work that they give you. So, if you've put them off-side, well you can find that the hours can drop substantially or if you're on the other side of the coin, you know, if you're in favour, well, the work hours can improve. (Wayne, 42, security officer)

Performance and surveillance

Many casuals see little difference between the intensity of casual and permanent work. However, 'the fear factor' drives others to intensive work patterns. They report being under pressure to work hard. In some cases, casuals do the work that ongoing workers do not like. For those in some sectors, it is important not to stand still, or you may be sent home. In other cases, new casuals are expected to be instantly productive with little support or induction:

... so if, for example, a team leader asks for anybody who wants to work two hours more tonight because we need to finish the job, all the people fight for two hours. And when [you go to do something] some guy says 'Give me the broom, I do for you.' ... It is like a theatre ... it's a race trying to demonstrate that you are very good. All the people ... try to demonstrate that they work quickly and they work very quickly, even when the workers don't need to.... (Theresa, 28, food manufacturing)

This intensive effort may be underpinned by a sense of being under surveillance. Feeling expendable affects some casuals who want to have a positive reputation so they get another chance to work next time. Some casuals feel that they can 'never relax' or take a break:

... we were never allowed to be still. If we were seen still, then that meant we were slacking off so it was always drummed into us that, basically if we're standing still, then we shouldn't really be on the shift (laughs) ... Yeah, which is very stressful and I would come home exhausted and very stressed ... Always, always buzzing, the whole time buzzing, yeah. (Daniel, 21, fast food)

Voice

The price of speaking up can be very high: a 'DCM' as one describes it ('don't come Monday'). Indeed, some experienced and skilled workers are very careful not to offer suggestions about improvements in their workplaces as this is seen as a threat to permanent workers and supervisors. Those with personal confidence suffer less, but for most workers in this study, the price of casual terms is a loss of both individual and collective voice:

I think when you're in a casual position, if you're very vulnerable and very unable to voice, I don't think that that should actually stop me and it does. It does have that effect because you do feel vulnerable and because you know that you can't sort of stand your ground while things get sorted out because the way it would be sorted out is you wouldn't get another contract. (Dorothy, 53, research assistant)

Casual work in Australia: remaking the terms of work

This article has reviewed casual workers' general assessments of the non-pay related aspects of their work. It reveals the way in which casual workers see themselves as commodified labour, rather than as employees with a package of entitlements and a 'living wage' that confers workplace citizenship on them – a citizenship that includes a voice at the workplace, physical safety, and collectivity:

It's all part of this thing where they can toy with you however they want because you're just some sort of a commodity that they've called in, like labour hire you're not an employee any more you're just like this thing that can perform labour so they can call you in whenever, they can get rid of you whenever, they can treat you however they want, it's all part of it. (Sarah, 24, student waitress/telemarketer)

Being 'toyed with' as raw labour power is reminiscent of an earlier phase of economic development when workers were hired given short-term work closely matched to production demands, with limited citizenship, and great opportunities for employer control. For example, at the turn of the twentieth century on the waterfront the 'bull' system

pitted wharf labourers against each other. Under this system, men assembled in a public place to be chosen for the day's work by foremen or stevedoring agents of the shipping companies. Favourites for work were the 'bulls', men of such physical strength that they could work longer and harder than the others. Such a system also favoured compliant and docile workers and facilitated discrimination against militant or troublesome men who might agitate for improved conditions. (Beasley, 1996:19).

While today's casual workers are increasingly feminised and work in white collar and service sector jobs, they, too, are favoured if they are compliant, exposed to surveillance and persistent performance assessment, offered insecure hours and pay and penalised if they contest their terms. Avoiding these hazards depends upon a good boss and back-up income. While some casuals love their jobs and give a lot to them, many have grown cynical about them and no longer offer ideas and extra effort at work. Given the growing proportion of casual workers in the Australian labour market, there is a price for productivity (explored in Pocock *et al.*, 2004), and a shift in the terms of power in the Australian workplace. For many workers, the cost of their casual work is measured in their own work experiences and on their dependents, their partners and the social fabric of the whole society.

Returning to the questions arising from the literature, many casual workers do not view their casual jobs as 'good' jobs. They are well aware of their loss of voice, conditions and status. For many, the work lacks flexibility and control over both their work and their social time. For some, this form of work makes permanency unlikely as their 'on tap' status is more attractive to employers. Greater insecurity at work affects many ongoing non-casual workers and their workplaces. Their precariousness drives their lower training effort and divides workplaces. It imposes costs for productivity, for the health system and across the broader community. It silences workers in workplaces and seriously undermines their practical access to collective organisations or even their individual voice. This is a high price to pay for flexibility that suits many employers but only a minority of casual workers, based on the results in this study. These costs affect households, families, children, social life and communities well beyond the commodified contract of employment.

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