Seeking stability in unstable employment: An exploratory study of temporary agency workers' career self-management

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly dynamic labor markets have caused a steep increase in nonstandard workers. This study focuses on agency temps who work via labor market intermediaries at client organizations. The short-term and frequently changing nature of their jobs creates uncertainty about their employment and personal stability. Based on an explorative qualitative interview study among 27 agency temps, we studied how agency temps self-manage their careers. Our study reveals that the precarious career environment and financial dependence on agency work make agency temps' career self-management different from existing depictions of career self-management in the literature. Specifically, we reveal that agency temps' career self-management engagement is relatively short-term and primarily reactive. We find that they focus on survival and stability as career goals, and they engage in four career behaviors: (1) moonlighting, (2) self-profiling, (3) compensatory career behavior, and (4) job search behavior. Subsequently, we identify two negative long-term outcomes of these career behaviors: (1) being locked-in and (2) experiencing resource loss during unemployment. Accordingly, this study contributes to the nascent literature on temporary agency work and career self-management by identifying career behaviors and consequences in a precarious and volatile context. Our findings can help career counselors and policy-makers safeguard the career self-management of agency temps.

1. Introduction

> *"I said to the manager, 'That is not nice, three hours beforehand, to say I do not need to come [in] anymore.' I said to him, 'I have no income anymore after the three hours."*

(Respondent 7; agency temp)

Agency temps are employed through short-term contracts with a labor market intermediary (LMI) and work at an LMI client organization (Bonet et al., 2013). The agency temp in the above quote describes an unexpected career event that she could not control:

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Her flexible employment would stop in 3 h, ending her agency temp job and consequently her income. This quote is only one of many examples in our study demonstrating how employment relations become more unpredictable and that long-term employment security and career advancement are no longer provided (see also Allan et al., 2021). As a result, agency temps need to navigate precarious and volatile careers characterized by financial income instability, career-path uncertainty, and emotional turbulence (Caza et al., 2022).

In addition to the ongoing destabilization of employment, labor market experts highlight how temporary agency work has become more structural. LMI client organizations increasingly use it as a systematic staffing strategy rather than an actual "stepping-stone" toward long-term employment (Chambel & Sobral, 2019; Fisher & Connelly, 2017). By contrast, agency temps often seek a long-term contract (Marler et al., 2002). To evaluate this mismatch between labor market circumstances and agency temps' aspirations, agency temp research has thus far focused exclusively on the transition into agency work without exploring the continuous (career) development and experiences of agency workers. That is, agency temp research has used frames such as push vs. pull motives (Sobral et al., 2019) and low vs. high-skilled workers (Marler et al., 2002). Such studies have revealed that pushing workers into contingent work, which is more often the case for agency temps (Marler et al., 2002), leads to negative outcomes, such as decreased job satisfaction and well-being (Lopes & Chambel, 2014). However, although these studies have helped identify the initial affective outcomes for agency temps, they have not explored the (pro)active career behaviors these agency temps may use during their contingent employment. This is a critical problem in the literature because many of these workers move from one temporary position into another, hence forming a potential long-term chain of career experiences. Studying how they approach their career behaviors is, therefore, essential to better understand the mismatch that exists between employer staffing strategies and agency temps' (career) aspirations.

The career self-management literature has described the importance of the activities that workers initiate to manage their careers (De Vos & Soens, 2008; Hirschi & Koen, 2021). It has shown that career self-management leads to several positive outcomes among workers in standard employment contexts, such as well-being (Wilhelm & Hirschi, 2019), career success (De Vos et al., 2009), vertical and hierarchical career movement, and job enrichment (De Vos et al., 2008). However, career self-management has been scarcely investigated in volatile and precarious contexts, such as agency temp work, where job security and support for career management are lacking. An exception is a recent study among solo-self-employed workers, showing unique properties of their career self-management (Van den Groenendaal et al., 2022). Therefore, career self-management among nonstandard workers (Cappelli & Keller, 2013) is a relevant research path for the career self-management literature. Furthermore, the mismatch between employer staffing strategies and agency temps' career aspirations demonstrates that career management within this domain is desperately needed. However, this context "may paradoxically also obstruct people's ability to engage in career self-management" (Hirschi & Koen, 2021, p. 13). Indeed, recent work argues that workers in a more precarious context might not have the resources and support they need to proactively self-manage their careers (Dóci et al., 2022; Forrier, 2023). In contrast, the majority of work on career-self management assumes that it is feasible for everyone to proactively manage one's career. So, career self-management might unfold differently for agency temps.

To address this problem, we explore the following research question: *How do agency temps self-manage their careers?* This study contributes to three literatures. First, we add to the career self-management literature (De Vos & Soens, 2008; King, 2004; Sturges et al., 2008) by enhancing the understanding of career self-management in changing career contexts (Hirschi & Koen, 2021; Van den Groenendaal et al., 2022), namely, among agency temps navigating precarious and volatile careers. Second, we extend the agency temp work literature (Lopes & Chambel, 2014; Sobral et al., 2019) by looking beyond the motives for transitioning into agency work and applying a long-term career perspective on agency work. By exploring the career self-management of agency temps, we also develop a better understanding of how these workers can sustain their careers in a context that is characterized by career uncertainty (Ashford et al., 2018). Third, we contribute to advancing career theory more broadly (Baruch et al., 2015; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009) by exploring how it benefits from integrating context (see, e.g., Baruch & Rousseau, 2019; De Vos et al., 2020; Inkson et al., 2012). Specifically, our examination of career self-management among agency temps may help to understand the context sensitivity of career concepts and theories.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Agency temp work

Agency temp work is a form of nonstandard employment (Cappelli & Keller, 2013). Contrary to open-ended long-term contract employment, nonstandard employment is defined as employment based on short-term contracts (Cappelli & Keller, 2013). Agency temp work involves volatile working hours, limited contract durations, and precarious contracts. While in standard employment, laying off workers entails high direct costs, agency temps can be terminated with low direct costs (Fisher & Connelly, 2017). In fact, the client organization determines how long it needs an agency temp (Koene et al., 2004), while it has no employment contract with any agency temp, but instead has a separate contract with an LMI. Due to this gap in organizational support structures, agency temps lack job security and organizational career development (Zhang et al., 2015). In sum, agency temps need to navigate a precarious and volatile career environment.

2.2. Career self-management

Arthur et al. (1989, p. 8) define a career as "the unfolding sequence of a person's work experiences over time." Career self-management thus denotes the behavior that individuals apply to navigate their careers (Wilhelm & Hirschi, 2019). In particular, Greenhaus et al. (2010, p. 12) defined career self-management as "a process by which individuals develop, implement, and monitor career goals and strategies." Individuals collect information to increase their understanding of themselves and their environment,

which nurtures their career goals (King, 2004). Accordingly, individuals solve problems to develop career strategies to achieve their goals (Greenhaus et al., 2010). Some examples of career self-management behaviors are networking, creating opportunities, self-nomination for a position, and seeking career guidance (De Vos et al., 2009). Hence, individuals build and develop their skills to help them realize their career goals within or outside an organizational structure (De Vos & Soens, 2008; King, 2004; Sturges et al., 2008). Career self-management conceptualizations encompass both cognitive (e.g., goals) and behavioral elements (e.g., actions that help realize career goals).

Career self-management research has primarily been developed among high-skilled workers in the core workforce navigating careers that are characterized by good working conditions (De Vos et al., 2009). This focus, however, is problematic. Wilhelm and Hirschi (2019) underline career self-management theorizing "has produced largely context-free models and research" (p. 131), thereby overlooking emerging contextual influences. In addition, King (2004) highlights how scholars have "tended to portray career self-management in highly optimistic terms, as a source of personal empowerment and liberation" (p. 130). Much of the research on career self-management has focused on workers who have a variety of personal resources for effectively engaging in career self-management (Beigi et al., 2018; Sturges et al., 2008). For example, career competencies – defined as knowledge, skills, and abilities – are essential for career development (Akkermans et al., 2013). These resources are positively related to the perceived employability of workers, which leads to their career success (Blokker et al., 2019; Lo Presti et al., 2018). Thus, at least among high-skilled employees, career self-management behaviors provide an advantage in successfully and proactively navigating one's career.

By contrast, we do not know much about career self-management among nonstandard workers having short-term contracts, such as freelancers, gig workers, on-call workers, and agency temps (Cappelli & Keller, 2013; Retkowsky et al., 2023). Due to the short-term contract, these workers typically lack the resource characteristics of good working conditions, such as job security and organizational career advancement. There are only a handful of studies researching career self-management among nonstandard workers, but they indicate that career self-management may be different among such workers. These include a qualitative study exploring highly skilled contractual workers' tactics for obtaining projects that expand their skills (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006) and a recent qualitative study examining solo self-employed workers' career self-management (Van den Groenendaal et al., 2022). Additional research on this group of nonstandard workers that also takes into account potential shortcomings in career self-management conceptualizations due to contextual and social factors is critical, as nonstandard and precarious working conditions are becoming more prevalent (Allan et al., 2021). Otherwise, career self-management understanding risks not adequately mirroring the career self-management engagement of all workers in the current labor market (Wilhelm & Hirschi, 2019).

2.3. Career self-management among agency temps

Studying career self-management among agency temps facilitates (1) understanding career self-management in career contexts characterized by precarity and volatility and (2) challenging the underlying assumption typically held in the career self-management literature that individuals have great control over their careers. First, the current understanding of career self-management is limited by its focus on organizational career advancement, such as obtaining a promotion or pay increase. Those goals may be secondary for agency temps due to their unstable and precarious employment. As low-wage work and poverty can shape work attitudes and behaviors, they are also likely to affect career self-management (Leana et al., 2012). Hence, agency temps may focus on making enough money to cover all their costs at the end of each month (Caza et al., 2022).

Second, although research in the area of sociology has emphasized the importance of context regarding careers (Bimrose, 2019; Thomsen, 2012), research in the area of organizational and vocational psychology has heavily emphasized the idea that individuals have great control over their careers (see, e.g., Brown & Lent, 2019; Hirschi & Koen, 2021). However, the agency temp context may limit the control these workers have to manage their careers. Agency temps often have skills that employers can easily replace, which potentially impedes their control in regard to their career (Allan et al., 2021; Newman, 2009). Although they must navigate a precarious career, they are also prone to rely on career self-management because they operate, by definition, within "'in-between' spaces, betwixt and between work roles, organizations and career paths" (Ashford et al., 2018, p. 25). Thus, studying agency temps can generate insights into the potential shortcomings in the area of organizational and vocational psychology regarding the fairly agentic conceptualization of career self-management in highly dynamic and precarious work environments (Hirschi & Koen, 2021; King, 2004).

3. Method

3.1. Research design

Agency temps have one of the most insecure types of employment within the landscape of nonstandard work in the Netherlands (CBS, 2020). Instead of being a side hustle as often seen in the gig economy (Sessions et al., 2021) where online labor platforms hire workers on-demand (Keith et al., 2019), for most agency temps this insecure employment makes up the entirety of their work (Van Arsdale, 2013). Although we realize our research originates from a European stance, we see great value of our theorizing for workers having insecure employment around the world.

We aim for a rich understanding of a poorly understood phenomenon. Generating understanding on the understudied lived career experiences of agency temps required us to take rich data as the starting point for our theorizing (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, we chose a grounded theory approach (Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Furthermore, we adopted an interpretive approach, described by Charmaz (2014), to investigate agency temps' career experiences. This interpretative approach is particularly

Table 1

Participant overview.

Inter-view #	Hours per week	Gender	Age	Country of birth	Education	Sector	Agency work experience	Work history (= time unemployed and in traditional work)	Interview duration (minutes)
1	32	Male	28	The Netherlands	Higher vocational education (HVE)	Production	1–2 years	Worked in family business which stopped business	150
2	32	Male	25	The Netherlands	High school	Production	2–3 years	Nothing priorly, directly temporary agency work	148
3	30–32	Female	50	The Netherlands	Secondary vocational education (SVE)	Production	4–5 years	Was not working for a long time due to getting children, therefore 7 years traditional work	114
4	38	Male	56	The Netherlands	SVE	Production	4–5 years	21 years traditional work	259
5	24	Female	28	The Netherlands	SVE	Administration	Less than 1 year	2 years unemployed, therefore 5 years traditional work	291
6	32	Female	27	The Netherlands	HVE	Communication	1–2 years	3.5 years traditional work	210
7	40	Female	58	The Netherlands	HVE	Call center	12–17 years	4 years unemployed, therefore 19 years traditional work	276
8	30–32	Male	55	The Netherlands	HVE	Production	1–2 years	18 years traditional work	185
9	24	Female	55	The Netherlands	High school	Administration	2–3 years	2 years trying to have own business (did not work), 5 years not working (choice), 3 years traditional work, 9 years not working due to children, therefore, 13 years traditional work	240
10	32	Female	28	The Netherlands	Master	Administration	Less than 1 year	Graduated from university, directly then temporary agency work	90
11	32	Female	62	The Netherlands	SVE	Administration	4–5 years	10 month unemployed, therefore 36 years traditional work	180
12	40	Male	55	The Netherlands	HVE	Production	29 years	Several times unemployed (longest 7 years from 2009 to 2016)	212
13	32	Female	43	Suriname	High school	Procurement	12–17 years	For over 17 years between unemployment (sometimes for many years) and temporary agency work, half a year trying to work abroad in London, therefore 5 years traditional work	221
14	32	Female	24	The Netherlands	Bachelor	Administration	Less than 1 year	Graduated from university, directly temporary agency work	120
15	40	Male	Mid 30s	United Kingdom	Master	Procurement	1–2 years	7 years traditional work	134
16	32	Male	59	The Netherlands	Prevocational education	Education	12–17 years	13 years own business, therefore 4 years traditional work	180
17	14	Male	68	The Netherlands	Master	Education	Less than 1 year	42 years traditional work	136
18	N/A	Male	63	Suriname	HVE	Education	7–9 years	31 years traditional work	210
19	24	Female	28	The Netherlands	HVE	Education	7–9 years	Directly temporary agency work	96
20	16	Female	50	The Netherlands	SVE	Administration	7–9 years	Was only 2× unemployed for maximal 2 months since doing temporary agency work, therefore many years traditional work	246
21	32	Female	52	The Netherlands	HVE	Education	NVT	Had her own business but needed to stop due to health reasons	108

Table 1 (*continued*)

Inter-view #	Hours per week	Gender	Age	Country of birth	Education	Sector	Agency work experience	Work history (= time unemployed and in traditional work)	Interview duration (minutes)
22	50	Male	44	Turkey	High school	Logistics	7–9 years	Was within the 8 years of doing temporary agency work several times for longer unemployed (the 8 years feel for him more as unemployment), therefore 15 years in traditional work	190
23	32	Male	54	The Netherlands	Master	Administration/ Customer service	7–9 years	2 years unemployed, therefore 17 years traditional work	117
24	40	Female	49	Portugal	In Portugal (N/A)	Logistic	12–17 years	1 year unemployed, therefore N/A	80
25	32	Female	61	The Netherlands	HVE	Administration/ Customer service	2–3 years	6 months unemployed after she had resigned due to reorganization, therefore 40 years traditional work	70
26	32	Male	70	Suriname	SVE	Logistics	3–4 years	Longer unemployed due to depression, therefore N/A	175
27	32	Female	47	The Netherlands	SVE	Logistics	7–9 years	1 year unemployed, therefore 17 years traditional work	195

Note. Total: 12 men and 15 women ranged from 24 to 70 years old (mean 47).

useful for profoundly exploring the subjective experiences and views of the social actors in an understudied phenomenon (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Hence, we position this study within a social constructivist ontology and follow the assumption that people are knowledgeable agents in their socially constructed realities (Cohen et al., 2004). Regarding our specific study, social constructivism enables the inquiry of careers within their respective social, economic, cultural, historical, and temporal contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018), thereby facilitating our analysis of how agency temps construct meanings and actions in their career. We conducted semi-structured interviews because these allowed us to explore the socially constructed careers of these agency temps.

3.2. Researcher positionality and perspectives

The research team included one doctoral researcher (first author) and four tenured faculty members (an assistant professor, an associate professor, and two full professors, in the order of authorship) at Dutch universities. All have received training in qualitative research methods, and have had experience in conducting qualitative research from different paradigms, including a social constructivist paradigm. The author team brought together expertise in career research, educational sciences, HRM, organizational psychology, and labor law. The authors are in different career phases (ranging from 5 years to 43 years of research experience). The doctoral researcher position is a temporary employment contract in the Netherlands, while the others have stable employment (with one retired author being the exception) and are financially healthy. Given our background, we can thus state that we are familiar with the flexible Dutch labor market. We, however, do not have experience with agency temp work ourselves making us an outsider to some extent. The research team has a specific attitude toward careers, that is, we believe that everyone is entitled to a sustainable career. In particular, this study is part of a bigger research project which aims to stimulate sustainable careers for nonstandard workers. Therefore, we acknowledge our tendency to view precarious careers of agency temps as an issue that needs attention and improvement.

To safeguard the trustworthiness of our findings, we draw on several methodological moves (Pratt et al., 2022). We carefully designed the data collection, for example, by making sure participants felt safe and could fully express themselves, and conducting in-depth interviews. Further, we invested in making our interpretive and constructive process transparent. This was achieved through memo writing and peer debriefing. The first author engaged in memo writing as a ritual throughout the process of data collection and data analysis. This ensured a report of the procedure management and development of emergent theory (see also the section on data analysis). Next to memo writing, peer debriefing (Fassinger, 2005) between the first, second, and third authors was done monthly during 1.5 years. In the monthly peer debriefings, we challenged each other with our interpretations on an ongoing basis. This was complemented by our ad hoc reflections in written email communication regarding updates and critiques on our own thinking processes. In addition, members in the research team had different insider versus outsider roles to manage implicit influences of our assumptions or bias on the analysis.

3.3. Sampling and data collection

The first author recruited participants using an open call for interviews through two LMIs and one agency temp network that had access to the agency temps of multiple LMIs. We also applied the snowball strategy and asked our interviewees about other potential participants. Specifically, we applied purposeful sampling to recruit agency temps who, first, were currently employed as an agency

temp or had been unemployed for no longer than one month but were previously employed as such and, second, had engaged in at least two placements as an agency temp. The inclusion criterion of one month ensured that participants accurately recalled their experiences. The criterion of at least two placements as an agency temp allowed us to capture career experiences rather than only single-job experiences. Participation in our study was entirely voluntary.

To identify the required sample size, we used the comparative method for theme saturation (Constantinou et al., 2017). That is, we tracked the themes in each new interview and compared them with those of other interviews. Once we identified similar themes across interviews, which happened after 24 interviews, we checked for their reoccurrence in three final and additional interviews (#25–27). To prevent any bias in the identified themes, we randomly rearranged all 27 interviews and then performed a final check for the reoccurrence of these themes. Consequently, we reached saturation after 27 interviews. See Table 1 for an overview of the respondents' demographics of our final sample.

We developed an interview protocol informed by our disciplinary perspectives and sensitizing concepts (Charmaz, 2014). Sensitizing concepts are "some ideas and directions to explore" which provide "a start of inquiry not an end to it," thereby being tentative tools that are "subject to correction and change" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 31). Specifically, we formulated broad questions on sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020) related to 1) career changes and events over time, 2) career experiences as an agency temp, 3) social relations, and 4) future career perspectives. We used the sustainable career framework because it explicitly adopts a systemic and dynamic perspective that allows studying dynamic interactions between personal, contextual, and temporal factors that may impact agency temps' careers (De Vos et al., 2020).

In terms of the career concept, we adopted Arthur et al.'s (1989, p.8) seminal definition of a career as 'the unfolding sequence of a person's work experiences over time.' We chose this definition because we deliberately and explicitly aimed to explore how their work evolves over time and how this contributes to their career development. Furthermore, this definition implies that job-related experiences are an inherent element of careers. More precisely, the accumulation of job and work-related experiences is what comprises a
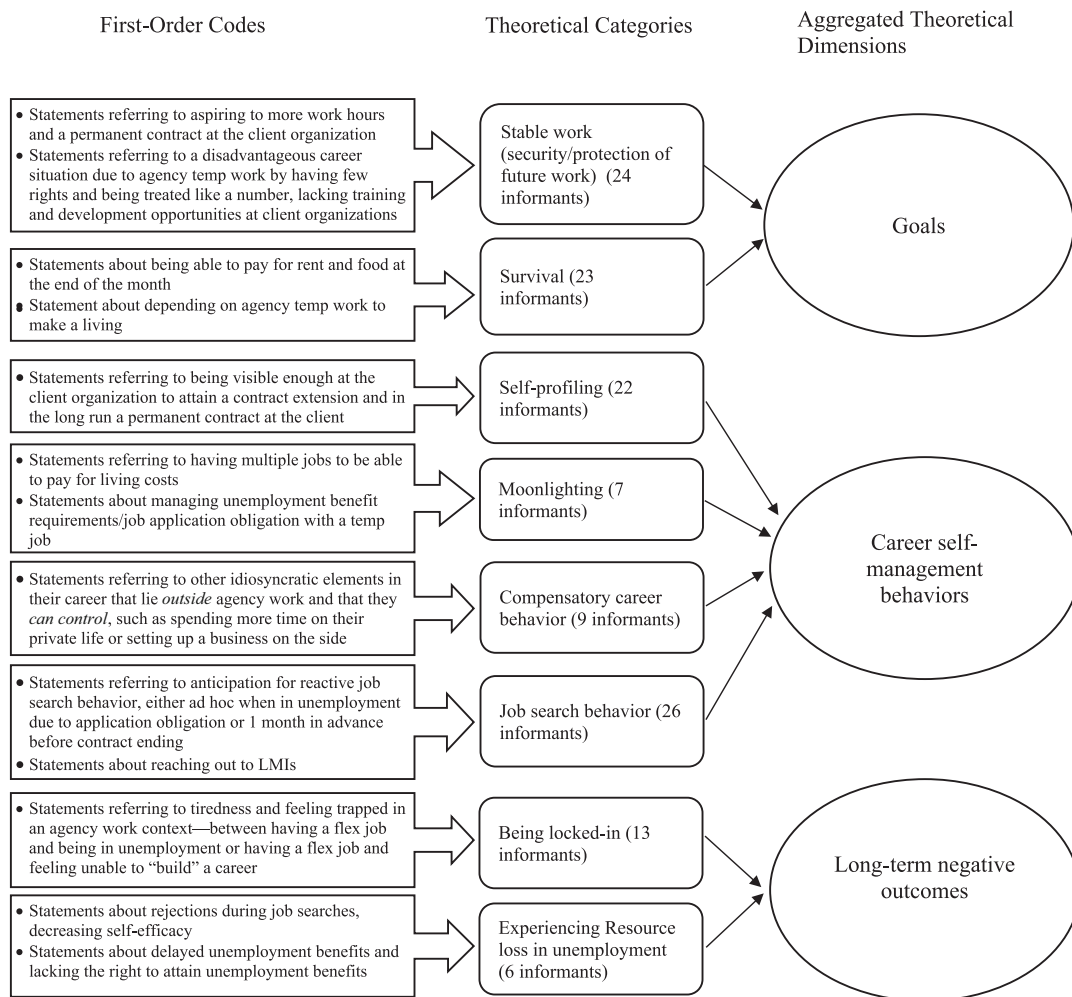

Fig. 1. Overview of data structure for career self-management among agency temps.
Note: All categories are typical as defined by Hill et al. (2005).

career, which is exactly what we tapped into during our interviews. Interestingly, participants discussed active working periods during placements as being part of their career, whereas periods in-between placements (i.e., without a job) were considered to be outside of their career experiences. By contrast, over the course of the study we recognized that periods of unemployment are also part of their career experience, even very impactful parts.

Initially, we asked broader questions throughout the interviews, as data collection progressed, we focused on narrower areas of inquiry based on the results of our simultaneous data analysis. For instance, replaceability as an agency temp emerged as a crucial theme early on, driving us to specify questions accordingly. The Supplementary Online Material shows our interview protocol.

Interviews lasted, on average, 171 min (ranging between 70 and 291 min), resulting in approximately 77 h of recordings. The variation in the interview length was caused by the varying complexity of the participants' career stories. Respondents that had a long history in agency temp work or in general, needed more time to share their lived experiences. In addition, the first author saw the relative differences in power and status between herself and the participants causing some participants to distrust her at the beginning of the interview. Charmaz (2014) highlights that this can be an issue the interviewer needs to be attentive to and needs to manage in case it occurs in the interview. Hence, more time was needed to build trust in an unbalanced relationship, which was done by adopting the role of an interested learner instead of a distant investigator (Charmaz, 2014). Interviews were performed during the nonworking time of the agency temps to ensure a neutral and safe setting for them to express their experiences. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom ($n = 24$) or in person ($n = 3$) depending on each participant's preferences. One interview was conducted in English, and 26 interviews were conducted in Dutch, the native or preferred language of the participants. All interviews were recorded with the respondent's permission and transcribed verbatim by the first author. To retain the original tone of the interviews, the data were analyzed without translating the transcripts.

3.4. Data analysis

Our analysis was an iterative process in which we constantly made sense of our data via comparisons (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). It was an ongoing process of our sensemaking, in which we stayed open to potential surprises in the data. As a consequence, we had several rounds of coding to develop a data structure that most accurately mirrored the lived experiences of agency temps.

We understand coding as involving balancing creativity and discovery with rigor (Jarzabkowski et al., 2021). We involve rigor by following Corbin and Strauss's (2007) three level coding structure. Another way to gain rigor is using coding software. In this regard, we lean toward discovery, in line with Fassinger (2005) and Charmaz (2000) who highlighted that relying on software for coding can inhibit freely engage in interpretive work and deep reflections that go along with theoretical sensitivity for the emergent theory. Therefore, we used Atlas.ti selectively; only to quantify codes after the first- and second-order codes were developed, to check that we did not over- or underappreciated some codes or if codes needed to be relabeled. This check used Hill et al.'s (2005) method to show the representativeness of the included categories by classifying them as variant (among at least two or three participants), typical (among at least half of the participants), and general (among all participants). Although our analysis itself was not focused on typical categories only, Fig. 1 shows that the categories emerging from our analysis were represented in at least half (typical), but not all of the participants (general).

Chronologically, our data analysis consisted of the following steps. The first author interviewed participants based on a broad, open interview protocol. The first author transcribed the interviews and wrote free-flowing, theorizing memoranda about emerging codes and hunches which nurtured sensemaking of the data and highlighted areas that needed further analysis. For example, participants complained about their often brutal situation and how they wanted to not sink any deeper. The first-order codes were induced by coding interview data (Corbin & Strauss, 2007), which was a step the first author did after each new transcribed interview. The first author compared those codes to codes from the previous interviews and, if necessary, revised the codes. Thus, from the get-go, our data collection and data analysis happened simultaneously, with a new iteration of analysis after each interview. The first-order codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) allowed her to access key elements that were important for our informants. Such key elements were, for instance, having a number identity, a disadvantageous career situation, and specific behaviors (see Fig. 1 for more examples).

To gain a more profound understanding, the first author discussed the emerging codes with two other authors (i.e., the second and third authors) once a month. Specifically, at this stage of the analysis, we explored a deeper structure among the first-order codes. We moved in circles from data to puzzling preliminary insights (i.e., hunches). Prevalent patterns among codes were clustered into inductively induced second-order codes (theoretical categories). These second-order codes transformed the insights, based on the informants' meanings, into a higher level of abstraction (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). No relations or causalities were theorized at this point. The main hunch was that we were seeing actions to manage elements related to careers.

As the first author was deeply emerged in the data, the slightly more distant stances of the other two team members safeguarded reflectivity and nurtured discussions about the data and emergent theory. If there were disagreements, we discussed them and, where necessary, relabeled codes. Two further team members (i.e., the fourth and fifth author) were deliberately assigned a reflective outsider role. Once every six months (i.e., three times in total), preliminary findings including the codes were shared with them. They fulfilled a devil's advocate role to scrutinize uncertainties related to codes and the (preliminary) interpretations (Gioia et al., 2013).

Once we had developed the second-order codes, based on inductive reasoning without literature, we started to engage with prior literature. This was the moment we switched from inductive to abductive reasoning (Charmaz, 2014). Adductive reasoning is "a mode of imaginative reasoning researchers invoke when they cannot account for a surprising or puzzling finding" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 200). We follow Charmaz (2014), who states that grounded theory can contain abductive reasoning (this is also supported by others, see e.g., Gioia et al., 2013; Locke et al., 2008). Hence, at this stage, we went back to the literature to identify a theory that could help explain our main hunch that agency temps described to be in a disadvantageous career situation and tried to get a grip on it. Yet, despite their

attempts to try to get a grip on their career in the short term, they ended up in agency temp work over and over again.

A key development came when, based on our reflections, we posited the question: 'could what we are seeing be described using career self-management theory?' This was a conceptual leap (Klag & Langley, 2013), but our existing hunch (which had earned its way into our analysis via extensive inductive coding) gave confidence that this leap was grounded in the data rather than being theory-driven. The conceptual leap in qualitative research is defined as "a consciously realized and abstract theoretical idea in an empirical study" (Klag & Langley, 2013, p. 150). At this stage of our data analysis, we bridged descriptive and theoretical sensemaking to continuously advance the conceptual leap of our theorizing (Klag & Langley, 2013). Specifically, we broke down the conceptual leap into conceptual steps by using our question as a starting point for a dialogue between our empirical data and key career self-management tenets. For example, we pondered whether the fight for basic financial security we saw could fit with career self-management despite its focus on more advanced goals, such as financial status and advancement. We wondered whether the behavior that was so clearly a reaction to the precarious circumstances could fit with career self-management despite its focus on proactive behaviors. We saw the career self-management literature gave at least some language to describe our observations, helped distinguish between relevant and less relevant data, and offered a home for our ideas. We shifted from viewing discrepancies as evidence against the fit of career self-management labels toward viewing discrepancies as new ideas to contribute to career self-management.

After that shift, we established the career self-management concepts of goals, behaviors, and a new concept of long-term negative outcomes (so far not discussed in career self-management) as third-order codes (aggregate dimensions) (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Thereby, we used career self-management as an analytic framework (Morrow, 2005) helping us to reach this higher level of abstraction of our emerging theorizing. An overview of this final data structure is shown below in Fig. 1.

We noticed that we contribute to two new kinds of goals 'survival' and 'stability', and new kinds of behavior, encompassing for example 'compensatory behavior', and 'moonlighting'. We also discovered new outcomes such as 'being locked-in' and 'experiencing resource loss'. Then, we used career self-management theory's relations between the third-order aggregated themes as a starting point for theorizing causalities between our second-order dimensions. However, we found that it could not explain everything. Specifically, goals did lead to behavior, but not quite via the mechanisms hitherto mentioned in career self-management literature. Furthermore, compensatory behavior did not result from any goal mentioned by participants. Thus, our data seemed to demand and require additional theorizing. Instead of inducing new concepts from the data, we iterated between sensemaking and reading literature until we found that we could explain our data by borrowing concepts from conservation of resources theory (COR) (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Specifically, conservation of resources theory helped us to understand career self-management theory's existing mechanisms as limited to behavior under upwards gain cycles to optimize the career while a resource preservation focus better described our participants' behavior. Conservation of resources explained how the participants' precarious situation leads to a preservation mode via individuals' resource preservation, and it helped us to interpret compensating behaviors as attempts to regain such resources.

4. Findings

Overall, we found that agency temps focus on survival and stability as career goals. Below, we describe these goals and the accompanying career self-management behaviors. In particular, they engage in four career behaviors: (1) moonlighting, (2) self-profiling, (3) compensatory career behavior, and (4) job search behavior. Moreover, we show how, over time, agency temps face two long-term negative outcomes in their careers: (1) being locked-in and (2) experiencing resource loss during unemployment.

4.1. Goals

Stable work (security/protection of future work). The agency temps aimed to attain stable work, which they associated with a standard employment situation. The agency temps explicitly mentioned that they aspire to obtain a stable permanent employment situation (e. g., #4, #5, #6, #7, #10, #11, 17, #21, #22, #24). They also associated stable work with obtaining a contract extension so that they could work longer at the client organization. Similarly, they aspired to extend several short-term contracts that they also associated with a more stable work situation. For instance, as one agency temp expressed:

> *"Actually, I just want to stay there. And, somewhere, you secretly have a piece of hope of, 'but maybe I can stay longer. Maybe I'll get a contract from [name of client organization].' You keep a piece of hope somewhere of, 'if only I can stay.'"*

(#6)

Next to the goal of stable work, which was associated with a contract extension or attaining a permanent contract, participants sought to obtain a guaranteed number of hours per week, which were interpreted as a sign of stability regarding their current situation:

> *"Some temporary workers get the opportunity where you get a kind of hours guarantee. Hours guarantee, they call it. That you have to offer them at least 60 to 90 hours every four weeks. Also, there is no work there they have to pay. That's my advantage; I can say that even if there is less work, I will always be employed, along with a number of other people who have signed the same contract. They are then assigned, first and only then, the people without such a contract. We have priority."*

(#4)

In sum, the agency temps were seeking anything that offered them some additional security and stability in their work. Ideally, this

would come in the form of a permanent contract. However, if this was not working out for them, they hoped to obtain extensions of their temporary contracts and guaranteed hours per week.

Their aspiration for stable work arose from their need to secure future work and to change the status quo, which was quite disadvantageous to them.

The agency temps described the disadvantaged career situation they were in. In regard to their client organization, they reported that each client organization considers only its core employees as talent. Hence, only those designated as talents have access to internal career mobility opportunities such as promotions, new internal positions, and training and development programs. In particular, participants emphasized their exclusion from internal vacancies at the client organization (#8, #10, #16) and the associated lack of investment in their training and development (#19, #26). As one respondent reported:

> "I really see flex jobs more a bit like laying hens—those chickens that are continually just fattened up and then rejected [for the] next load. You're there as long as they need you, until they can find another, cheaper, worker."
>
> (#20)

Furthermore, across the interviews, respondents described a similar "number identity", referring to themselves as being seen as "second-range employees" (#8), "modern slaves" (#22), "trash resources" (e.g., #3, #5), and thus, just "numbers" (e.g., #5, #14, #24). As one agency temp told us:

> "Well, you're a number. You can be taken away any time. It can be said any time, 'you're done.'"
> …
> Yeah, so that's why I'm doing this interview. I just want us to be treated more humanely. Because if the flex workers stay away, the companies close."
>
> (#I5)

This quote shows that the number identity not only indicates the agency temps' disadvantageous career situation—of being replaceable at any time as a worker—but also shows their feelings of undervaluation due to a lack of appreciation for their work. As a consequence, these workers have formulated their own goal of attaining stable work to improve their status quo.

Survival. In addition to aspiring to obtain stable work, survival was another primary goal. Because the agency temps financially depended on agency temp work, it was important for them to survive in their volatile career environment. Surviving in this environment was characterized by having enough money at the end of the month to pay for rent and food. As one agency temp explained:

> "I have to make sure I have work every year. I didn't choose it for fun. That I do not work for one year doesn't work [for me]. I just have to have work. I just need to have income."
>
> (#19)

The agency temps expressed that they were in this volatile career environment involuntarily and purely out of necessity. For example, as some agency temps put it, *"Actually, I don't want to be it at all. It's more born of necessity"* (#17); *"It hasn't been my choice, of course" (#10)*. These workers expressed their dependency on agency temp work. For them, job insecurity felt real and was a threat. Therefore, survival was something they needed to manage. As an agency temp noted:

> "Because you are very dependent on an organization financially; because the moment you have a zero-hour contract and they fire you…I get paid weekly from [name of LMI]. Look, it's now Monday. Suppose I were to be fired now; I don't actually have to come to work tomorrow. [This] means I earned [on] one day for this week and I have no income from next Monday. So, that's very annoying."
>
> (#11)

The financial dependency colored the career experiences of the agency temps in a negative way. The few participants that were less financially dependable, either because they were at the beginning of their career and still were supported by their parents or because they were at the end of their career and had a financial buffer, had slightly more positive career experiences. This further evidenced that financial dependency is an important driver to understand career experiences.

In the following section, we explain the career behaviors that the agency temps adopted to self-manage their careers in light of their goals.

4.2. Career self-management behaviors

We identified four career self-management behaviors in our data. The four career behaviors (self-profiling, moonlighting, compensatory behavior, and job search behavior) were an adaptation to the temps' volatile and precarious employment context. That is, in line with their goal of stable work and survival, the agency temps often described engaging in behaviors to manage their status quo and delaying their career self-management behavior until changes happened.

Self-profiling. Workers adopted a specific career behavior to be visible to the client organization. Each client organization determines how long it needs an agency temp and if it will provide another short-term contract to them. In response, due to the precarious nature of short-term employment, these workers tried to create a positive image of themselves in the eyes of their clients by demonstrating their competencies. Adopting this career behavior involved presenting the knowledge, skills, and abilities of these workers. Accordingly, they focused on presenting themselves as a capable and hardworking worker with high work ethics. Hence, participants described engaging in specific behaviors, such as impression management (#17), and showing they were committed to the

work they performed (#7). One agency temp described engaging in self-profiling by performing tasks as quickly and well as she could. Thus, she aimed to demonstrate that she was a hardworking and capable worker who was valuable to her client organization:

"I just make sure that I do my job well, and I make sure that I really work…at a rapid pace and that I have a really good open mind about how the processes run and what names hang on who I need to be with, where I can get information from and stuff like that."

(#10)

Similarly, another agency temp explained that she was highly committed to her agency temp work to increase the likelihood of obtaining stable work at the client organization. As this agency temp highlighted:

"And, that does have that; every time you do it, you have to work a lot more… You actually have to work a lot harder than other people. You don't have to put in 100 percent, but you have to put in 200 percent."

(#21)

By engaging in self-profiling, the agency temps aimed to be visible and be deemed a good and hardworking worker by their leaders and colleagues to increase their likelihood of staying at their client organization (#5, #10, #14, #17, #21). As a consequence of engaging in this career behavior, the agency temps invested much of their resources and energy into self-profiling at the client.

Moonlighting. Moonlighting behavior was adopted as a career self-management behavior to manage survival in the present. This behavior encompassed getting additional income sources if the agency temp's job did not provide sufficient working hours to make enough money. The agency temps could thus perform multiple temporary jobs simultaneously (e.g., #10, #19, #27), which drained their resources because participants did not experience these jobs as complementary. Having multiple agency temp jobs cost them energy to manage these jobs simultaneously and to ensure they made enough money. As a participant expressed:

"And, I actually joined [name of client company]; I actually, that was initially, for ten hours a week. And, then, I actually had all kinds of jobs in addition to that. Sometimes I had three jobs next to each other. Do you understand how exhausting that is, at a certain point? At a certain point, you can't manage it in your head anymore…to always ensure you work enough hours."

(#27)

Some agency temps were also receiving unemployment benefits in addition to their agency temp job income because their job(s) did not provide enough working hours to make a living. To receive these unemployment benefits, the agency temps were obligated by law to submit job applications while maintaining their current agency temp job. Completing these job applications was a behavior that was contradictory to their goal of attaining stable work at the client organization. However, the participants perceived the need to complete these additional job applications as a misuse of their already scarce resources. Participants highlighted that it this was a game they needed to play to fulfill this administrative legal requirement in addition to the needs of their actual agency temp job. *"It is a game you are playing,"* said one respondent (#19). This job application obligation thus preoccupied certain resources of the agency temps, hindering their use for career long-term planning. As an agency temp explained:

"In addition, you also have the obligation to apply for jobs, [but] you have actually found a place that you would really like to stay [at] and invest in. So, I'd rather spend my energy on that than on the obligation to apply for a job. But, if you do want the financial benefits that are attached to it, you need to apply for additional jobs."

(#21)

Both career behaviors—having multiple jobs and following up on the job obligation requirement—were thus necessary to participants' survival and acquisition of enough money to make a living at the end of each month.

Compensatory career behavior. Participants engaged in compensatory career behaviors to seek additional resources, such as self-growth or meaning, which respondents could not obtain through their agency temp job. This career behavior was adopted when agency temp work was primarily a source of income and when workers did not enjoy the work they performed. Furthermore, the agency temps underscored the lack of training and development opportunities at the client organization. As a consequence of both—performing a job they did not enjoy and lacking developmental opportunities (e.g., #19, #26)—the workers described their actual job as, for example, *"terribly boring"* and *"mind-numbing robot work"* (#3) or declared that *"production work is not my chosen work but it brings in money"* (#13). To counteract the lack of meaning and self-growth in their agency work career, these workers focused on other aspects of their career that lay outside their agency work sphere. That is, some of the agency temps reported working toward a future career switch, such as becoming an entrepreneur and setting up their own business (#14, #16). Another participant reported working toward obtaining a driver's license to develop more opportunities in the future for fixed employment (#1). As another example, one participant reported that he spent four hours every day on his own project, building an online store:

"The one thing, mostly, is that I can just do it with less stress because it's not that my job makes me happy. But, it's extra money, again. I'm also just trying to set up other things besides my work now. And, what I earn at [name of client organization], I just see as extra income. (…) Just starting a webshop, selling things via the internet, things like that. So, I try every day, even if I don't feel like it; I just try to free up four hours for a project that I then do myself. I'm just working on things, and as soon as I get the money, then, I'll get right on it."

(#3)

As mentioned above, some participants described how their search for additional resources entailed investing in their career outside their current agency work by, for instance starting a business. Others spent more time seeking resources by exploring

opportunities in their private life, such as focusing on a new role in their life, including being a grandmother (#2) or thinking about the future and investing time in finding a partner (#1). Others described starting a new hobby in their private life (#11, #13). For instance, Respondent 11 described discovering her new hobby of building furniture in her nonworking time as follows:

> *"So, in other areas, I do make strides. So, it's not that I'm standing still in life. When I have free time left over, I want to invest in a hobby for myself. I found out that I really enjoy making furniture. We just moved and have a roof terrace, so I wanted to make a Landes bench out of old planks. Maybe I think it's stupid, but now, I think I like it. So, in that way, I'm trying to live my life differently and get satisfaction from that."*

(#11)

There were two meanings associated with adopting this career behavior. On the one hand, it was an escape from the perceived lack of meaningfulness and missing self-growth in agency temp work. On the other hand, it led to acquiring new resources outside agency temp work to compensate for the lack of resources within agency temp work. This development of new resources kept agency temps going.

Job search behavior. Numerous participants described adopting job search behavior in an improvised and externally motivated way instead of engaging in long-term strategic planning regarding job search. This meant either engaging in job search behavior ad hoc whenever they lost their job or shortly before a contract ended. Therefore, career self-management engagement via job search behavior was mostly a reaction to their volatile environment once actual changes had occurred in this context. Furthermore, multiple respondents reported that the client organization and LMI decided, often behind the worker's back, to end the worker's contract earlier than planned. For example, respondents described these sudden work terminations as follows: *"very abrupt and a shock"* (#11), *"per direction, the need to leave"* (#14), *"all of a sudden you have to go"*, a *"thunderclap"* (#21) and *"literally, within 5 minutes, you are standing on the street"* (#9). In these cases, contract termination either came as a surprise, or suddenly the hours of their contract were decreased (e.g., #27) in a way that they could not anticipate beforehand. As one agency temp said:

> *"I wasn't even fired; if you don't want to renew my contract…Okay, that's your right. You don't have to keep me. But, [now] I have to leave immediately, as if I did something, as if I stole [something]. I haven't done anything wrong. (…) Just the bit about like I've done something wrong, when I know I haven't done anything wrong."*

(#14)

In addition to looking for new employment when their agency temp job ended suddenly, the agency temps mostly reported adopting job searching behavior shortly before their contract ended in case it became clear that a contract extension would not happen. The law required client organizations to make a decision regarding a contract extension one month before an official contract ended, at the latest.

The agency temps used their resources to moonlight, perform well at their client organization (e.g., self-profiling) and to engage in compensatory career behavior. As a consequence, their available resources for job search behavior were somewhat limited. Indeed, job search behavior was often described as a cause for further resource depletion. As an agency temp noted, *"That takes a lot of energy. It's quite restless in your head, actually."* (#27). Such job search behavior thus happened more often out of necessity than deliberate goal setting. As a result, respondents described their acceptance of any job when they needed money to make a living (e.g., #24, #26).

Next to the way in which job search behavior was adopted, agency temps mostly described one specific job search behavior, namely, reaching out to LMIs. Agency temps reported *"I walked past the employment agency"* (#27), *"I went in there and said I'm looking for work. Can I register here?"* (#11). Then, LMIs looked for suitable work. Hence, the agency temps either contacted several LMIs to increase the likelihood of working again soon or reached out to the manager of a specific LMI where they had previously worked. If agency temps worked close together with one LMI over time it gave them a somewhat secure feeling. A respondent highlighted:

> *"That, despite being a flex worker, did give me a certain kind of security, because you could increasingly assume that if one job ended, then [name of LMI] would then come again with the next one."*

(#17)

In sum, the agency temps' job search behavior encompassed reaching out to an LMI. Due to the extreme pressures that the agency temps were facing, such job search behavior did not involve any reflective elements regarding the agency temps' career aspirations. Instead, their adopted job search behavior was a rather reactive type of job search registration. Their focus was on social capital development and maintenance by connecting with recruiters (i.e., managers at LMIs), while their human capital development reflections were not integrated into their job search behavior. Similarly, the agency temps described how LMIs tended to successfully place them in jobs that matched their current skills, *"visible on the cv"* (#27), instead of their potential. That is, LMIs did not promote job search behavior for the human capital development of the agency temps. As an agency temp said:

> "They provide work, and they did, in my experience, a very good job. But, they would not provide a career. [They are] not being stimulated to take the step to the next level.
>
> …
>
> They gave me a job [that] I already did. They stated [it was] at the same range and did not try to give me a job as an internal supervisor or coordinator or leader of a team after having gained so much experience. They did not dare to cross that border. And, that is something I realized some time ago. It stays within the same area; it doesn't expand. And that is something they could put more effort into."

(#17)

4.3. Long-term negative outcomes

Particularly participants who had a long history with performing agency temp work or faced several transitions between unemployment and agency work described long-term negative outcomes. Specifically, they reported feelings of being locked-in agency work and experienced resource losses as an agency temps.

Being locked-in. As a consequence of experiencing the agency temp career context over a long time period, the agency workers reported feelings of tiredness and their perception of being trapped in agency work (#5, #8, #14, #19). For example, a respondent who had performed agency work for 15 years noted how she has been unable to leave it:

> *"I know, anyway, with temporary workers, it's never permanent. You hop from one job [to] another. That's no holding on. That's no stability. So, I know for myself, I have to do some training if I want to get out of this temp situation. I won't come out otherwise. I've been trying to get out for fifteen years. (…) It's really very sad. You don't get out."*
>
> (#8)

This example indicates that agency temps who perform agency work for a long time and who struggle to smoothly attain new work feel that they are trapped in a vicious cycle. In another example, a respondent who had been an agency temp for 12 years described this employment as a continuous effort to survive, which made her feel trapped within agency work:

> *"All these years, I never had the space to go searching. This was always survival, survival, survival. Phase A takes two and a half years, anyway, [or] three years. I've never been out of phase A because every time, I went to a different employment agency. For me, they can really burn that phase A at the stake. I find it so terrible for people like me who really do their best. And…you can never go any further… you always stay stuck."*
>
> (#14)

In sum, the agency temps encountered the feeling of being locked-in after performing agency work for several years. The data show that, over time, they become less active in career self-management engagement as this volatile and insecure career context depletes their resources. This resource depletion seems to be driven by the career need of these workers for stability and security, which they struggle to attain on their own.

Experiencing resource loss during unemployment. In addition to being locked into their agency work context, respondents described the unemployment phase, when they had to search for new or other jobs, as a source of resource depletion. Specifically, receiving job application rejections decreased their self-confidence and self-efficacy. As one respondent highlighted:

> "I: And why do you think you have lost the self-confidence a bit?
> R: Actually, because of applying a lot and not getting an answer. Apparently, [I'm not] even worth the effort to say thank you to anymore. I really experienced that as very unpleasant."
>
> (#22)

Thus, their confidence in their own competencies had faded. Additionally, receiving rejections was described as triggering resource depletion due to the effort and time that the workers had invested, only to receive such rejections. As an agency temp recalled, *"The thing is, you get so many rejections sometimes that it can make you despondent"* (#27). Another agency temp specifically highlighted the frustration this had awoken in her: *"And, I was also very actively applying for jobs. But, then, I was rejected very often. So, since then, that raises a lot of frustrations"* (#11).

In addition to the resources that were depleted when having no work and applying for jobs, some of the agency temps identified their institutional context as a source of income depletion. That is, the agency temps did not always manage to obtain unemployment benefits when they did not have a direct follow-up assignment. Hence, they occasionally were fired before they could attain their eligibility to request unemployment benefits. As one respondent illustrated:

> *"That was also so terrible, because if they had let me work until April 2020, I would still have been entitled to get unemployment benefits. That was another one of those things. So, I had to apply for welfare(…) I hadn't even accrued unemployment benefits, because they wouldn't even let me work until April."*
>
> (#14)

This quote shows that this agency temp did not successfully navigate her entry into the phase of having no work. She was unable to attain the right to request unemployment benefits because the client organization no longer needed her. Furthermore, other participants reported a delay in obtaining their unemployment benefits due to the associated administrative burden, which caused income instability. One respondent explained that the social security benefits are not well aligned to his agency temp work: *"The system is not well put together"* (#19).

In sum, the agency temps wanted to obtain security and safety in their careers. Staying in the agency temp context for a long time drove people into a vicious cycle that they felt they were unable to break via their own career self-management engagement. For some of the agency temps, this vicious cycle made them feel like *"job hoppers"* (#21) incapable of building a career over time. Additionally, continuously starting at new clients repeatedly and engaging in self-profiling to secure their currently insecure agency temp position *"because, as an agency temp, you're actually outlawed"* (#21) depleted their resources. Finally, they could not claim unemployment benefits when they did not perform 26 weeks of continual agency temp work, which caused financial problems for the agency temps that further depleted their resources.

5. Discussion

In this study, we sought to explore how agency temps self-manage their careers. Our findings have several theoretical and practical implications.

5.1. Theoretical implications

First, we contribute to career self-management theorizing (Hirschi & Koen, 2021; King, 2004). Although research on career self-management has mainly studied it as a context-free phenomenon (Wilhelm & Hirschi, 2019), we show how the theory benefits from considering the interaction between the person (agency) and the context (system) (Bimrose, 2019; Patton & McMahon, 2014). Specifically, our findings indicate that career self-management can best be understood if, in addition to the traditional agentic theorizing, we also consider how career self-management is shaped and bounded by the context workers are embedded in. For agency temps, that recognition helps understand how their career self-management is more about reactivity than proactivity. That, in turn, explains why their career self-management is about surviving instead of thriving. An overview of our implications for career self-management theorizing is provided in Table 2.

Our first contribution is that we observed career-related goals as the foundation of career self-management strategies among agency temps that are not entirely in line with the career self-management conceptualizations used in other studies. One such atypical aspect was agency temps' goals related to stable work and survival. Whereas most research focuses on strategies to develop and thrive (Wilhelm & Hirschi, 2019), our study shows that agency temps primarily used career self-management to survive and aim for stability and security. Thus, our findings contribute to career self-management theorizing by showing that career goals likely focus on different elements, such as desiring employment and financial stability, in volatile and precarious career contexts.

Second, and based on our first contribution, we argue that scholars should approach career self-management not from a purely agentic stance, nor from a purely contextual stance. Instead, career self-management is shaped by the interaction between personal and contextual factors (see also De Vos et al., 2020). Specifically, we theorize that the volatility, precarity, lack of organizational support, and low resource availability that typically occur in the agency temp career context causes worker's individual-level focus on preservation vs. optimization of resources. In line with this idea, the conservation of resources theory suggests that, when resources are threatened, individuals are motivated to protect themselves from further resource losses (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 2001). This is what we see among agency temps, which in turn, reduces their active career self-management behavior and causes them to feel locked-in and experience even more resource losses (i.e., a loss cycle, Hobfoll et al., 2018). By contrast, thus far, such career self-management theorizing has implicitly been developed in only "one direction"—the direction with resource gain cycles that allows worker to grow and thrive. We show that this one-sided view is problematic, as it does not represent the career self-management of all workers, especially those navigating precarious careers.

Our findings highlight the limited individual agency these workers have in actively managing their career development across their agency temp projects. This exacerbates their (precarious) situation, because agency temps need long-term career self-management perhaps even more than those with long-term work and those who do not depend on their agency work to make a living. Given that their need is high, their lack of engagement in long-term oriented career self-management behavior indicates that the employment context constrains the career self-management that workers can and will do. For example, agency temps' volatile and precarious employment means that they lack a "parenting" employer to invest in their employability and thus nurture their employability and career development (Fugate et al., 2021). Accordingly, agency temps engage in various short-term, extrinsically driven career self-

Table 2
Integrating prior findings and this study's insights on career self-management theory.

	Developed among careers in *primary labor market*	Developed in this study - among careers in *secondary labor market* characterized by volatility and precarity
Career self-management type	Self-initiated, proactive	Reactive
Change situation and self (optimization)	Influencing behavior (e.g., self-promotion, Boundary management Positioning behavior (human and social capital development) Validating behavior	Self-profiling (= reactively adopting this behavior to change the situation by aspiring to attain stable work; behavior is reactive as it is a response to the current disadvantageous situation) Compensatory career behavior
Maintain status quo (preservation)	N/A	Self-profiling (= reactively maintaining the status quo as it is aimed at also securing the current work) Moonlighting Haphazard job search behavior
Career self-management goals	Objective career success (e.g., promotion, salary rise) Subjective career success (e.g., work-life balance, career satisfaction)	Stable work as a reaction to the social disadvantages Survival
Career outcomes	Resource gains	Over time: resource losses, being locked-in
Conceptualization of individual and context in career self-management	Individual and context are divided into separate units; Career context is something that can be fully managed via agency of career actor	Individual and context actively interact; Career context is influencing agency of career actor
Underlying career experience	Thriving; Career actor is seen and capable as a kind of a self-starter to successfully navigate career	Surviving; Career actor has limited agency to navigate career

management behaviors (except for compensatory behavior, which is more intrinsically driven) to focus on their survival and stability.

Our third contribution is that our findings provide guidance for how to specify career self-management theory to workers in such precarious career contexts. Specifically, our findings indicate that career self-management among these workers is more about reactivity than proactivity. Agency temps are preoccupied with staying safe in the present and attempting to find stable work. They are in a resource preservation mode, unable to invest additional resources in long-term career self-management. Accordingly, they spend their resources on *self-profiling, moonlighting, and compensatory behavior*, and use minimal resources in their *job search behavior.* Thus, we add to current debates in career research regarding the emphasis on self-initiation and proactivity by introducing context (Forrier, 2023; Jiang et al., 2022), highlighting that career self-management behaviors may be reactive instead of solely proactive (Akkermans & Hirschi, 2023). Agency temps' career behaviors reflect their more short-term and reactive career self-management.

As a fourth theoretical contribution, our findings extend the agency temp literature by offering a career-based perspective on temporary agency work. The literature has focused exclusively on transitioning into agency temp work (Lopes & Chambel, 2014), for example, on how people are often pushed into agency temp work (Marler et al., 2002; Sobral et al., 2019). Our findings help to understand how the career experiences of agency temps are shaped, beyond their initial transition into agency work. Specifically, our career perspective reveals that the long-term career sustainability is at risk for agency temps. A sustainable career has been characterized by De Vos et al. (2020) as a career that allows the renewal, instead of the depletion of resources over time. Specifically, they argue that career sustainability results from the dynamic interplay between happiness, health, and productivity in someone's career resulting from personal, contextual, and temporal factors. The long-term outcomes reported by our participants, related to feeling locked-in and experiencing resource loss cycles, hence represent clear risks for experiencing low levels of career sustainability.

Moreover, agency temps take few risks in terms of their career exploration and lack both long-term career planning and career management regarding their human capital (Leana et al., 2012). However, developing portable human capital is a necessary behavior to obtain a sustainable career in the new world of work which is characterized by volatility and changing work demands and skill sets. That portable human capital development requires construal-level ambidexterity, i.e., an understanding of the bigger picture regarding how agency temps' short-term jobs are related within their broader human capital development (Ashford et al., 2018). To this line of thinking, we contribute that pushed agency temps seem to lack this critical capability that is necessary to develop a sustainable career in this new world of work.

Finally, our study contributes to career theory more broadly (Baruch et al., 2015; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009) by exploring the context-sensitivity of career phenomena. Recent models and ideas in career research have started to emphasize person-context interactions as critical for career theorizing (e.g., Baruch & Rousseau, 2019; De Vos et al., 2020). In this case, the unique career self-management among agency temps indicates that this phenomenon is context-bound. Specifically, our findings show that they experience their career environment as a strong constraint to their career development which forces them to primarily engage in reactive survival strategies, which is different from the dominant tone in career self-management research (Hirschi & Koen, 2021). This contribution echoes recent work on refugees (Magnano et al., 2021), and mothers (Michaelides et al., 2023) in saying that career theory can be advanced by contextualization regarding marginalized groups. In particular, career theory can be advanced by making the ambitious commitment to strive for an understanding of career experiences that represent a wide variety of workers and not only of the so-called 'WEIRD' (i.e., Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) population in which many career theories were developed (Henrich et al., 2010).

For theorizing person-context interactions, future career research situated in the area of organizational and vocational psychology could benefit from integrating knowledge from other disciplines, such as the broader sociology (e.g., Bimrose, 2019) and management (e.g., Baruch & Rousseau, 2019) domains. Some emerging career theories have started to focus on such interdisciplinary perspectives, such as career ecosystems (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019) and sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020). In addition, McMahon and Patton's systems theory of careers (2014) may be relevant here because it maps the intrapersonal, social system, and environmental-societal system influences that are often under-represented in career theories. For example, from a broader neoliberal socio-economic system perspective, our study shows the power imbalance between agency temps and LMIs that employ them, and it highlights the vulnerability this distinct group of workers experiences (Dóci et al., 2022).

5.2. Practical implications

Our findings show the limited control that agency temps have regarding their long-term career development. Although they engage in career self-management, they feel locked-in and face resource losses after being in the agency work context for a long time. As a consequence, career sustainability among agency temps is at risk. Sustainable careers ensure that workers' physical and mental resources are not depleted but rather enriched over time in their dynamic operational environment (De Vos et al., 2020). Importantly, resource depletion seems to be caused by the agency temp context, characterized by many short-term contracts and low employment security. Insecure temporary agency work was not a choice for these workers, and they felt pushed into this job. Due to their often low human and social capital, they did not manage to find any other employment. From a strategic HR perspective, organizations hiring agency temps often do not invest in them because they consider them a strategic short-term investment to fill certain staffing gaps (Fisher & Connelly, 2017; Fugate et al., 2021). Therefore, we advise external (e.g., government) support that improves agency temps' human capital to encourage a shift to long-term investment by organizations (Zhang et al., 2015). Such organizational support may then offer additional resources to these workers, thereby reducing the reactive nature of agency temps' career self-management.

Furthermore, we advise career counseling for this vulnerable group in the labor market to take away resource drain threats (Bimrose et al., 2016), and help agency temps to gain resources to engage in training and development opportunities (Barabasch et al., 2015). For example, career counseling could focus on tailored job search behavior guidance. The job search behavior we found is ad-

hoc, improvised, and externally motivated, without reflective goal setting regarding job search quality. Thus, agency temps' job search behavior coincides with the haphazard strategy which is a manifestation of poor reemployment quality (Koen et al., 2010; Van Hooft et al., 2021). Career counseling could diminish or even prevent the subpar career outcomes such as being locked-in (Stengård et al., 2016) and experiencing agency temp work as a 'career trap', by helping agency temps to develop effective resource preservation and gain strategies.

5.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Despite this study's main focus on investigating how precarious employment shapes agency temps' career self-management, we do not want to ignore potential other sociodemographic categories such as gender, ethnicity, race or migration background that influence career behaviors (Obukhova & Kleinbaum, 2022; Smith et al., 2019). As shown in our findings, all of our participants reported feeling like 'a number'. This number identity, in combination with financial dependency on agency work, created economic hardship and social disadvantages. In terms of social disadvantages, prior research on race and gender in precarious work showed that female workers of color are most at risk of facing precarious work (Hanley & Branch, 2018). In addition, literature on precarious work and identity suggests that gender is a moderator for precarious employment (Allan et al., 2021). For instance, transgender workers experience stigmatization causing them to make career transitions into extremely precarious jobs, such as sex work (Nadal et al., 2014). Although certainly relevant in light of our research focus, we did not collect data focusing on sociodemographic categories. Hence, we call for theoretical sampling along sociodemographic dimensions to investigate potential social inequalities and how they relate to career self-management behaviors among nonstandard workers. Future research is needed to understand how sociodemographic categories and intersectional identities play a role in career self-management, next to or in combination with insecure employment and financial dependency (Kele et al., 2022).

We interviewed workers at one point in time but asked them about all their career experiences. However, the design of our study limits any detailed insights into career self-management processes and variations over time. For instance, we identified a vicious cycle that agency temps encounter after staying in agency work for a long time. This observation highlights the risk of a potential Matthew effect on the labor market (Forrier et al., 2018), where workers in stable careers that are characterized by good employment conditions have the resources to continuously manage their long-term career development, while the workers in precarious careers have only limited resources to actively engage in their strategic long-term career self-management, locating them in a risk group and underlining their vulnerability (Dóci et al., 2022). This risk of a potential Matthew effect highlights the need for more longitudinal process research on intraindividual changes over time (Sonnentag & Ilies, 2011).

Drawing on the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2018), we encourage future researchers to investigate the resource cycles among agency temps by applying quantitative growth model analyses (Liu et al., 2016). Such research could also investigate how agency temps might be able to break the vicious cycle that we have identified. In the career transition literature, being locked-in has been highlighted as a hindrance to transitioning into an aspired position (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021). Studying agency temps who have been in agency temp work a for a long period of time and recently transitioned into stable work promises to be another fruitful research avenue for understanding what helps agency temps to break this cycle.

Our study focused on agency temps working for traditional LMIs, and the majority of our sample worked in underexplored blue-collar professions. Although we focused on this specific group, we are convinced that our insights are also relevant for other nonstandard workers such as solo-self-employed and gig workers. That is, all nonstandard workers need to self-manage their career across multiple short-term contracts and assignments. In our study, we found that vulnerability was a key feature determining the way agency temps engaged in career self-management. Yet, nonstandard workers are not all equally vulnerable (Cappelli & Keller, 2013; Keith et al., 2019) and, consequently, we also expect some differences. Future research should investigate career self-management among other nonstandard workers operating in the gig economy with digital, e.g., app-based LMIs, such as Upwork or Uber, in white-collar and blue-collar professions (Gandini, 2016; Sutherland et al., 2020). Workers operating via online LMI platforms are matched and controlled by an algorithm (Newlands, 2021) instead of a human agent such as a recruiter or a client manager. Since they have freedom regarding when they work (although this freedom has been shown to be tacitly controlled, see Lehdonvirta, 2018), it would be insightful to investigate what kind of career self-management these workers perform. In addition to online LMIs, it would be helpful to explore whether other precarious contingent workers in occupations where temporary work is commonly used, such as actors and artists, also have the resource preservation mode. In contrast to the agency temps that we have studied, these workers could have a different career orientation that influences their career self-regulation and, in turn, their career behaviors (Hirschi & Koen, 2021).

We have shed light on workers' perspectives by exploring career self-management. However, we also observed in the data a tension regarding organizational career management, with agency temps feeling excluded from organizational career management. Contrary to career self-management, which focuses on individuals' actions to manage their careers, organizational career management offers insights into the activities that organizations engage in to manage the career of their employees (Bagdadli & Gianecchini, 2019). Hence, career self-management and organizational career management are seen as complementary (De Vos et al., 2009; Hirschi & Dauwalder, 2015). Therefore, we emphasize the need for research on organizational career management practices, specifically how such practices can complement the limited actions regarding agency temps' long-term career development. By doing so, such research would connect the well-established literature on organizational career management—thus far mostly limited to standard high skilled workers—to the growing literature on new organizations, such as labor market intermediaries and nonstandard workers. As Bonet et al. (2013) point out, "the literature [on LMIs] lacks a management voice. We know relatively little about the effects of LMIs on workplace attitudes and behaviors" (p. 342). For example, case studies on the organizational career management of LMIs in regard to

agency temps' career development would be fruitful. Moreover, determining the importance of LMIs themselves, beyond simply connecting agency temps to new work opportunities (Koene & Pichault, 2021), may provide key insights into fostering sustainable career experiences for agency temps (De Vos et al., 2020).

6. Conclusion

This qualitative study provides meaningful novel insights into how agency temps self-manage their careers. We have shown that agency temps engage in short-term and reactive career self-management. They are busy managing their survival and aim for stable work. As a consequence, agency temps lack long-term career plans and investments in their human capital. Agency temps also face the long-term negative outcomes of being locked-in and experiencing continued resource loss. In sum, although agency temps desperately need career self-management to successfully navigate their volatile career environment, this environment and their financial dependency on work limit their agency to do so successfully.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jana Retkowsky: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration. **Sanne Nijs:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Jos Akkermans:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Svetlana Khapova:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Paul Jansen:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of competing interest

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Acknowledgments

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2023.103877.

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