Toward sustainable careers for nontraditional workers

A glimpse into the future of work

Jana Retkowsky

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TOWARD SUSTAINABLE CAREERS FOR NONTRADITIONAL WORKERS

A glimpse into the future of work

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door

Jana Retkowsky

geboren te Hamburg, Duitsland

promotoren:	prof.dr. P.W.G. Jansen prof.dr. S.N. Khapova
copromotoren:	prof.dr. T. J. Akkermans dr. S. Nijs
promotiecommissie:	prof.dr. N. De Cuyper prof.dr. C. Freese prof.dr. F. Jabeen dr. J.G. Meijerink prof. dr. M. Tims

Chapter 1

Introduction

The future of work has arrived. The increased cultural acceptance of labor organized around nonstandard employment relations reflects a major societal change. For example, in the gig economy, work is organized via gigs, which are short-term contracts for one task. Estimates show 41 million workers are engaged in the gig economy in the United States (Gig Economy Data Hub, 2024) and around 28 million workers in Europe (European Commission, 2021). Lifetime employment is fading, and employment risks are being transferred from the organization to the worker. Nontraditional workers are now responsible for finding sequences of jobs and employment and need to self-manage their social security, such as pension and sickness benefits. They can no longer rely on traditional employers to manage their work lives.

Technological advances and economic forces reduce the permanence of standard employment relations (McDonald & Hite, 2018). Increasingly, autonomous systems such as ChatGPT, DALL-E, and Midjourney can generate output approaching or even exceeding human labor output (Gilardi et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2024), potentially replacing human labor in the near future (Frey & Osborne, 2023; Ritala et al., 2023). Until the beginning of the 21st century, being highly skilled was often perceived as a guarantee to find and maintain stable work, but times are changing – e.g., Generative AI is likely to impact high skilled workers the most (Felten et al., 2023). Technological advances reconfigure labor markets in a way that employment becomes less stable, generating change in where, when and for how long workers are needed, until technology again automates more aspects of work, further eroding the permanence of employment relations (Demirci et al., 2023; Hui et al., 2023). In addition, economic forces appeared during the Covid-19 outbreak and in 2023 triggering mass layoffs in big tech companies (Chamberlin, 2023), showing that, even if workers have a long-term employment contract, having work is no longer a life-long guarantee. Instead, organizations increasingly hire workers on short-term contracts to be more competitive (Lepak & Snell, 1999; Fisher & Connelly, 2017).

These technological advancements, economic forces, and societal changes come together in the fourth industrial revolution, which is characterized by short-term employment instead of traditional long-term employment. The first and second industrial revolutions led to the rise of factories and large bureaucratic corporations.

> "Employment relations moved from (…) [w]hat students of industrial relations now call the bureaucratic or traditional employment system to contracting and outsourcing, the unraveling of job security, the increasing allocation of employment to people on the basis of specific tasks or skills, and high-velocity labor markets in which people change what they do and who they work for with greater rapidity." (Barley, 2020, p. 22)

While much has been written about how traditional work is characterized by long-term employment in bureaucratic organizations (Bergman & Jean, 2016; Cropanzano et al., 2017), our knowledge of nontraditional workers' work experiences over time—workers who are contracted or outsourced on short-term contracts—remains limited (cf. a few exceptions: Kost et al., 2020; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Sulbout et al., 2022; Van den Groenendaal et al., 2022).

This lack of a career perspective on nontraditional workers that captures sequences of experiences over time (Arthur et al., 1989) is problematic. Research runs the risk of no longer being representative of the future of work. Management research has mainly built theory around the dominant groups in standard employment (Kessler & Gutworth, 2023; O'Leary & Almond, 2009), thereby not having the impact on society that it could (Wickert et al., 2021). This is especially harmful when those theories are not representative of an increasingly large group of workers—highly vulnerable, nontraditional workers (Bergman & Jean, 2016). As a consequence, we miss out on problem-driven research (Wickert et al., 2021) to better understand how careers of nontraditional workers are an issue that deserves attention and better understanding, "rather than the reverse where the empirical case is not more than illustrative auxiliary that has no real meaning or societal importance in itself" (Wickert et al., 2021, p. 303).

The lack of attention for nontraditional work is problematic for many concepts in the literature on careers, which were traditionally understood as lifelong employment in one organization and one occupation (Baruch, 2004). Yet, as argued above, the career risk distribution has shifted—especially for nontraditional workers—from the organization to the individual. (Hall, 2002; Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). This risk distribution can be described as an environment "where employees (…) [are] becoming little more than 'cogs' in a larger machinery of commodified work tasks" (Rogier & Collings, 2024, p. 5). Where the first industrial revolution deconstructed tasks into small repeatable actions, the fourth industrial revolution is deconstructing employment contracts into small temporary gigs.

The career literature has advanced in this direction by developing concepts, such as the boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001) and the protean career (Gubler et al., 2014; Hall, 2004). However, this development is incremental due to its dominant focus on high-status nontraditional workers, rather than on the most vulnerable nontraditional workers. For instance, these theories follow the underlying assumption that individuals have the (full) agency to navigate their careers. Yet, marginalized groups in the labor market lack this (full) agency. Therefore, this shift demands a new career paradigm. The sustainable career framework may be especially valuable to provide this by providing a systemic perspective on the interaction of person, context, and time (De Vos et al., 2020). Sustainable careers promote longevity, resilience, interdependence, and social justice (McDonald & Hite, 2018) by making careers a shared responsibility between individuals and organizations.

Scholars agree that this new paradigm helps to understand the future of work. But the sustainable career literature is only in its infancy, especially regarding sustainable careers for nontraditional workers.

This dissertation aims to address this shortcoming in the literature by answering the following research question: *How can nontraditional workers develop sustainable careers?*

1.1 Scope and definition

Before providing an overview of the literature, the scope and definition of the key ideas in this dissertation are shown. The key framework is sustainable careers. Kossek et al. (2014) characterized sustainable careers as having the financial stability to fulfil economic requirements, alignment with personal career and life principles, capability to tailor career to changing personal career and life principles, and space for revitalization, yet they do not specify in their definition how this can be achieved. In this dissertation, we follow Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015), who refer to sustainable careers as "sequences of career experiences reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, thereby crossing several social spaces, characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual" (p. 7). De Vos et al. (2020) further specify that the interplay of personal and contextual factors over time is crucial to establish a good balance in being happy, healthy, and productive in one's career.

This dissertation focuses on nontraditional workers. Nontraditional work can be distinguished by three criteria: contract flexibility, time flexibility, and place flexibility (Spreitzer et al., 2017). First, nontraditional work defined by contract flexibility looks at temporary work consisting of work performed based on short-term contracts (e.g., gig work), in contrast to traditional work performed based on a long-term contract. Second, nontraditional work defined by time flexibility consists of autonomy regarding when to work (e.g., trust-based working hours, in contrast to required predetermined work hours). Finally, nontraditional work defined by place flexibility gives autonomy regarding where to work (e.g., remote work). This dissertation focuses on nontraditional work in terms of contract flexibility.

I identified several co-existing labels for nontraditional workers, based on contract flexibility. Table 1.1 presents an overview of the terms used for temporary work and their meaning.

The frequency with which these terms are used differs depending on the discipline. For example, contingent work is still the most commonly used term, particularly among organizational behavior (OB) and human resource management (HRM) scholars (Connelly & Gallagher, 2004a; McLean Parks et al., 1998). Other prevalent terms are nonstandard work and precarious work, which are primarily used by sociology scholars (Campbell & Burgess, 2018; Campbell & Price, 2016; Kalleberg, 2000). I use the term nontraditional work to allow capturing the full richness of this group of workers' uniqueness, rather than being constrained to focus on one specific element.

Table 1.1 Overview of concepts used in review papers and conceptual papers on nontraditional work research

Concept	Dominant Field	Scope	Example Articles
Contingent work	Organizational Behavior and HRM	Generic term for flex workers	McLean et al. (1998), Connelly & Gallagher (2004a), Gallagher & Sverke, (2005), Feldman (2006)
Nonstandard work	Sociology	Generic term for flex workers	Kalleberg (2000)
Alternative work arrangements	Organizational Behavior and HRM	Generic term for flex workers	Cappelli & Keller (2013), Bessa & Tomlinson (2017), Spreitzer et al. (2017)
Atypical work	OB	Generic term for flex workers	Selenko et al. (2018)
Flexible employment	Organizational Behavior, HRM and Sociology	Term for flex workers in an employment relation	De Cuyper et al. (2008)
Gig work (also referred to as crowd-sourcing)	Organizational Behavior, HRM and Sociology	Term for flex workers in the on-demand economy	Ashford et al. (2018), Duggan et al. (2020), Friedman (2014), Gandini (2019); Kost et al. (2020), Kuhn (2016), Kuhn & Maleki (2017)
Precarious work	Sociology	Term for flex workers which are in situations characterized by high insecurity, low wages, low protection and poor job conditions	Campbell & Burgess (2018), Campbell & Price (2016), Kalleberg &Vallas (2018)
Solopre-neurship	Entrepreneurship	Term for flex work which is performed without an "employer" (i.e., independent contract work, gig work)	Cieślik & Dvouletý (2019), Stephan (2018)

1.2 The research thus far

The strategic HRM perspective has focused on nontraditional work from an organizational perspective. This literature investigates how a competitive advantage may be achieved by workforce staffing strategies with nontraditional workers next to traditional permanent workers (Antunes et al., 2023; Beerepoot & Lambregts, 2015; Lepak & Snell, 1999). Including nontraditional workers in an organization's staffing strategy provides organizations flexibility to adapt to changing market dynamics (Atkinson, 1984), cost savings (Rouvroye et al., 2022), specialized expertise (Corporaal & Lehdonvirta, 2017; Corporaal & Lehdonvirta, 2020), and resource optimization (Rouvroye et al., 2022). Later research adds nuances such as strategic value, labor market characteristics (Lepak and Snell, 1999), and indirect hidden costs, such as turnover, onboarding, and training for these workers (Fischer and Connelly, 2017).

In contrast to the literature on the organizational level, the work psychology literature focuses on the individual level of nontraditional workers themselves. This literature stream develops classification frameworks to explain nontraditional workers' work experiences. Scholars typically agree that nontraditional workers are a heterogeneous group (i.e., Ashford et al., 2007, Connelly & Gallagher, 2004a; De Cuyper et al., 2008; Guest, 2004), yet, they do not agree on how to classify different types of temporary workers in order to predict workers' attitudes and behaviors. I identified in the literature two main approaches to classify nontraditional workers, which I label: (1) an objective contextual approach, and (2) a subjective individual approach (see Table 1.2 for an overview).

The objective contextual approach puts the objective nontraditional work elements to the forefront and uses these as a base to distinguish between different types of nontraditional work. The objective nontraditional work elements are described as those elements that describe the unique work context of nontraditional workers, including both the timespan of work relations with clients or temporary employers and their consequences. Objective elements that have been used in the literature to distinguish between nontraditional work types include more or less benefits than traditional workers, variation in number of employers or clients, and degrees of organizational structural integration at the client's workplace or temporary employer's workplace (Feldman, 2006; Pfeffer & Baron, 1988). These elements often use as a starting point the different legal contracts nontraditional workers can have that specify the nature of the work relationship.

Table 1.2 Overview of the two identified classification approaches of contingent work

Approach	Assumption	Strength	Weakness	Example articles
Objective contextual	Differences in attitudes and behaviors of flex work are mainly explained by differences in objective contextual factors such as: more or less benefits than traditional workers, variation in number of employers or clients	Contextualizes flex work Acknowledges the variety of different contexts flex workers can be in which affect their attitudes and behaviors	Overlooks synergies across flex types Fails to capture new forms of flex work and fails to understand similarities between flex work types	Cappelli & Keller (2013), Duggan et al. (2020), Kuhn & Maleki (2017), Pfeffer & Baron (1988), Poon (2019)
Subjective individual	Differences in attitudes, behaviors and other outcomes of flex work are mainly explained by differences in perceptions such as: voluntariness/ involuntariness of workers to operate as a flex worker	Individualizes flex work Acknowledges the variety of perceptions based on push/pull motives which can easily be applied to new emerging flex worker types	Overlooks individual differences over time Fails to capture perceptions and individual differences after "entering" flex work and fails to understand subjective individual difference over time	Keith et al. (2019), Lopes & Chambel (2017), McKeown & Cochrane (2017), Sobral et al. (2019)

The subjective individual approach focuses on putting worker perceptions to the forefront in classifying nontraditional workers. Subjective elements are described as those elements that offer insights into how workers perceive the flexible contract situation. Important subjective elements used in the literature are the different motives for engaging in nontraditional work – often referred to as push/pull factors – which can be traced back to being voluntarily or involuntarily in the flexible contract situation (De Jong et al., 2009; Keith et al., 2019; Lopes & Chambel, 2017; Sobral et al., 2019). Motives are becoming more complex due to several push and pull factors, such as increased autonomy regarding when and where to work, higher earnings, or having no choice (when nontraditional work is the only way to sustain work) (Bernhard-Oettel et al., 2008).

The objective contextual and subjective individual approaches are problematic. The objective approach builds sub-islands around objective types—thus research streams around solopreneurship, freelancing, agency work, gig work, and on-call work. This is promoting scholars to lose the overview and not learn from each other. Further, as a consequence of the objective contextual approach, traditional/permanent workers are still seen as the norm (Bergman & Jean, 2016), as objective nontraditional worker types are mostly compared to traditional workers (e.g., Broschak et al., 2006; De Cuyper et al., 2019; Madden et al., 2017).

Further, the subjective approach is problematic because it is not capturing the complexity of nontraditional work. The dominant locus of research adopts a largely static view by assuming that nontraditional workers can be distinguished by being a voluntary (pulled) or an involuntary (pushed) nontraditional worker. Taking this to a higher level of abstraction, the underlying assumption is that being a nontraditional worker is an entity which can be divided into either voluntary or involuntary nontraditional worker categories, rather than a dynamic process. Dynamic processes are adopted, for instance, in cognitive science research, when investigating how development of individuals emerges (Smith &

Thelen, 2003), or research on socialization processes in organizations (Solinger et al., 2013). For instance, an originally pushed nontraditional worker can change into a pulled traditional worker, or visa versa. A career perspective that accounts for such dynamics is likely to unravel unique and valuable insights compared to the static results in the current literature. So, research on nontraditional workers is running the risk of not accurately conceptualizing the reality of these workers by overlooking time and context sensitivity. The joint consideration of person, context, and time factors from the sustainable career framework can account for such dynamic processes.

1.3 Research gaps

First, current research on nontraditional workers is lacking theorization of the context. Specifically, comparative studies between traditional and nontraditional workers apply the objective or subjective approach to claim that some variable or relation differs between the groups. But the discovery of such a difference remains an empirical contribution unless we understand what, about nontraditional work, is causing that difference. The current approaches are based on characteristics that research on traditional work showed to be important, rather than based on theories that explain lived experiences of nontraditional workers (Gioia, 2022). For example, De Cuyper et al. (2019) compare the effect of job insecurity on satisfaction between permanent and temporary employees. However, this does not tell us why that effect could be different. Is it really something about the permanence of the contract? We cannot tell from this study. To do so, we should theorize the context of nontraditional work explicitly identify what makes it different (Bamberger, 2008).

Second, current research on nontraditional workers aims to contextualize rather than theorize from the aspiration of generalization. Specifically, scholars draw on a limited range of mostly traditional organizational behavior (OB) and industrial organizational psychology IOP) outcomes, such as organizational citizenship behavior, commitment, and job satisfaction (i.e., Connelly & Gallagher, 2004a; De Cuyper et al., 2008). By focusing on the applicability of these more than on static theories and traditional IOP concepts, scholars fail to see researching nontraditional work as an opportunity to widen and deepen our understanding (Johns, 2006). Again drawing on De Cuyper et al. (2019) as an example, it measures job satisfaction the same way for permanent and temporary employees. However, the question arises whether "job satisfaction" ultimately means something different for nontraditional workers. For instance, is it the satisfaction from working on a short-term contract and project basis? Or is it the satisfaction with respect to how nontraditional workers define their actual job/work, which includes continuously marketing themselves to new or current contracting organizations and clients? Ashford et al. (2018, p. 3) argue "We need new theory, perhaps what Shamir (1992) terms a theory of 'nonorganizational work psychology,' and especially new research that better describes and specifies what individuals can do to be most successful when working in this new way." It is important to zoom out and see nontraditional work in the bigger picture—in its essence, nontraditional work is a key feature of the future of work. As a result, studies on nontraditional workers might even develop a new measure of job satisfaction that better captures the experiences of all workers in the 21st century.

All in all, we need more theory building that accurately represents the lived experiences of nontraditional workers. We need more theorizing that integrates the context to move toward real, generalizable understanding of the future of work that has arrived (Johns, 2006, 2017). To address this, the following sub-research question emerged:

Sub-research question 1: *How can we advance knowledge on nontraditional workers by theorizing on the lived experiences?*

In addition, the current research on nontraditional workers fails to theorize beyond experiences at one organization. Nontraditional work is an inherently new way of organizing work. Contrary to "traditional workers" working for a long time (if not for their lifetime!) at one organization, nontraditional workers work with multiple stakeholders together throughout time and space. We lack a conceptual career perspective—specifically, a sustainable career perspective—that allows us to capture the volatility that nontraditional workers navigate over time and the complexity of multiple actors operating together.

One way in traditional work to theorize antecedents for sustainable careers is via career self-management (King, 2004; De Vos et al., 2020), because career self-management encompasses the self-regulation needed to deploy the agency essential for navigating one's own career. Yet, we do not know how nontraditional workers navigate their careers to be happy, healthy, and productive throughout time (De Vos et al., 2020). Nontraditional workers operate in a new world of work that is characterized by short-term contracts, which bring its unique challenges to the forefront, such as financial instability and insecure jobs, career trajectory uncertainty, and work transience (Ashford et al., 2018). Research is needed exploring how career self-management is experienced (lived) in this new world of work and what its impact is on being able to experience a sustainable career.

Next to the personal factor of self-managing one's careers, the contextual factors are just as important to build a sustainable career (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden et al., 2020). The ways people can work and how work can be organized have changed (Barely, 2020), making it imperative to understand the reconfigured relationships, thereby integrating the contextual factors into theorizing. Context is even more important, since nontraditional workers move across jobs through (different) contexts. For traditional workers, the only context is their own organization. Further, while in bureaucratic organizations, traditional workers encounter mostly dyadic relations (Cropanzano et al., 2017); for nontraditional workers, relations are more complex (Cropanzano et al., 2023). Nontraditional work is fragmented (Duggan et al., 2021), and multiple actors outside of stable organizational boundaries often work together (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Spreitzer et al., 2017). Yet, up until now, scholars have not generated in-depth knowledge about the multiple stakeholders involved in nontraditional work and how they impact the career (un)sustainability of nontraditional workers (Bonet et al., 2013). Therefore, it is important to theorize a multistakeholder perspective—including the nontraditional workers themselves and their surrounding parties (e.g., clients, platform, managers)—on nontraditional workers' sustainable careers. The following sub-research question evolved:

Sub-research question 2: *How do person, context, and time interact in shaping nontraditional workers' career experiences?*

1.4 Research methods of the dissertation

This dissertation consists of a critical review study and three qualitative studies. To first develop a sustainable career perspective, I conducted a critical review of the current nontraditional work literature and integrated it into a sustainable career perspective on nontraditional work. Thereafter, in line with the emphasis on lived experiences, I use qualitative research methods to explore the socially constructed realities around nontraditional work and career sustainability (Gioia, 2022). Thereby, I can shine new light on a phenomenon that has been over-relying on the methodological lens of positivism characterized by many quantitative studies.

In the first qualitative study I will use in-depth interviews to study each participant's career pathway and nontraditional worker experience that is likely shaping their career sustainability. Importantly, I will adopt an interpretive lens (Charmaz, 2014) to fully capture the voices of nontraditional workers. I use grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to socially construct knowledge with the participants about their careers by focusing on their realities. Further, in describing the reasoning behind the code development, qualitative research is critiqued for using just a three-step formula to develop codes (Gioia et al., 2013; Pratt et al., 2022). Most papers do not take the reader on the coding journey (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010). This study describes its journey using the language of "identifying a conceptual leap" and "theorizing as a balance of creativity and rigor" (Klag & Langley, 2013). It hopes to inspire researchers to give them clarity and confidence in their journeys. While most qualitative studies describe their method as inductive, this is usually only true for the first level of coding, whereas in the later steps, abduction becomes the dominant mode of reasoning. This paper innovates by carefully describing where inferences come from data and where they come from connecting to theory. I hope that the detailed coding procedure and reasoning clarity in this study will help others to push qualitative research forward by not "blindly" adopting the three-step coding procedure, but rather drawing on mindful reasoning, hunches in the data, and literature during the data analysis process.

The second qualitative study will be an ethnography examining the relations actors have with each other in this new world of work. An ethnographic study design is appropriate to investigate social relations (Walby, 2007). Similar to the first qualitative study, I use an interpretive approach to understand the meanings actors ascribe to their work. Specifically, I use interviews, shadowing, and forum data to explore the practices nontraditional workers enact when performing their work that are likely influencing their experienced career sustainability. I can see how contextual factors, such as other workers and the online labor platform, impact the nontraditional workers' lived experiences shaping their (un)sustainable career. Shadowing enables researchers to generate insights regarding conspicuous invisibilities (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2007). I can see what the work is really like from the perspective of nontraditional workers, e.g., the Uber taxi drivers or food riders, one sees outside on the street in so many cities – to really see how nontraditional work is performed in action and what it means to be a nontraditional worker.

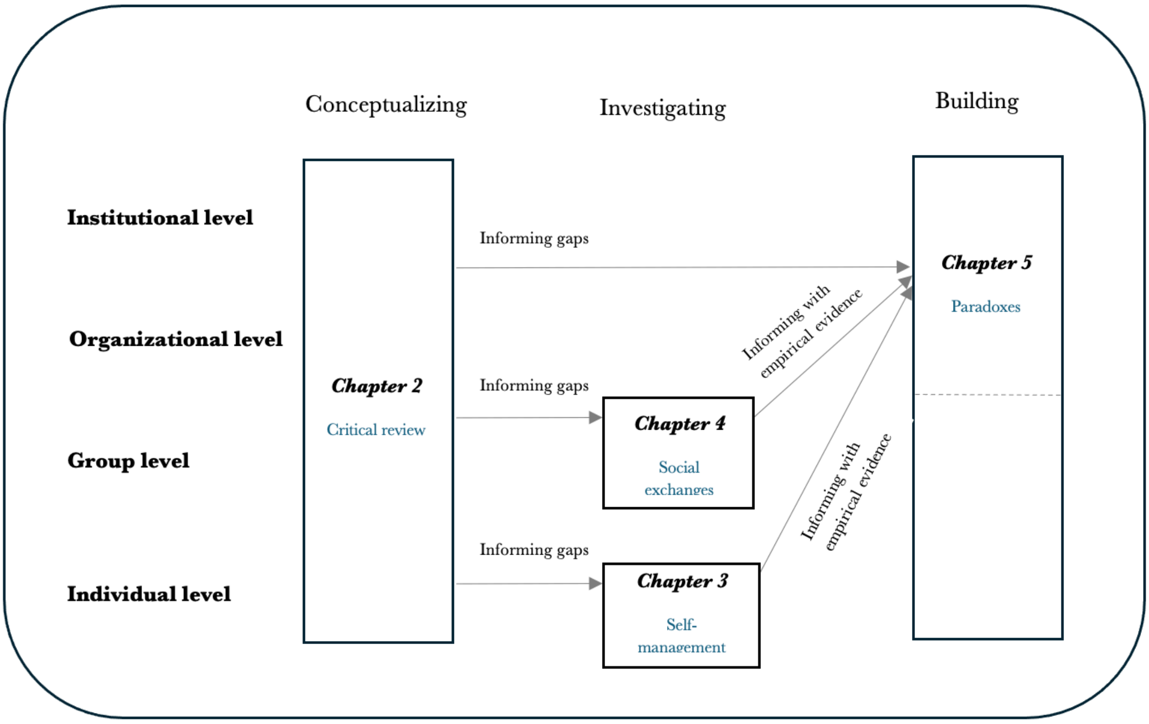
While the first and second studies explored nontraditional workers' experiences over time through their own eyes, in the third qualitative study, I aspire to co-create sustainable careers of nontraditional workers from the managerial and institutional perspectives. Further, while in prior studies I am interested in understanding the status quo of nontraditional workers' career sustainability, in this study I will follow the new method from Gümüsay and Reinecke (2022), and thereby aim to co-create knowledge with participants about a desirable (sustainable career) future for nontraditional workers. Unlike Delphi studies (Niederberger & Spranger, 2020), this method focuses on the collective understanding of a desired future, and differs from action research (Avison et al., 1999) by focusing on the broader understanding of the relationship between the present and the future, rather than on intervention and implementation processes.

In sum, I draw on a multi-stakeholder approach to understand sustainable careers of nontraditional workers. The methods I adopted aimed to explore sustainable careers of nontraditional workers by drawing on prior studies, understanding the socially constructed lived experiences of nontraditional workers' careers through their own eyes and through managers and policymakers' eyes.

1.5 Overview of dissertation

Following the critical scrutinizing of the field, I study the career experiences of nontraditional workers. In doing so, I generate new knowledge by answering the overarching research question: *How can nontraditional workers develop sustainable careers? Chapters 2, 3, 4,* and *5* comprise studies I conducted as part of this PhD research. *Chapter 2* presents a literature review study, while *Chapters 3-5* comprise empirical studies around career experiences of nontraditional workers. Lastly, *Chapter 6* summarizes the most relevant findings of the four studies, and discusses the theoretical and practical implications across all four studies, followed by future research avenues.

Figure 1. Integrating multi-level insights to build sustainable careers



1.5.1 Chapter 2: Toward a sustainable career perspective on contingent work: a critical review and a research agenda

Conceptualizing a sustainable career perspective for nontraditional workers.

This study is based on a critical review of the nontraditional work field. It aims to counteract the dominant "single job" view on nontraditional workers' experiences. Nontraditional workers are navigating beyond organizational boundaries, highlighting the importance of looking beyond one organization. I examined conceptual, review, and empirical articles published from 2008 to December 2021. I built a new conceptual perspective—sustainable careers—on nontraditional workers' work experiences over time. Thus, this study contributes to the contingent work field (Connelly & Gallagher, 2004a; Ashford et al., 2018) by providing new opportunities for future research based on this new perspective, and to the sustainable career field (De Vos et al., 2018; Van der Heijden et al., 2020) by specifying what are important personal and contextual factors over time in light of nontraditional work.

1.5.2 Chapter 3: Seeking stability in unstable employment: An exploratory study of temporary agency workers' career self-management

Investigating the role of the individual in building sustainable careers. This dissertation's second study aims to understand how nontraditional workers navigate their careers. Informed by the gap in the sustainable career perspective, it is important to look at the workers themselves. I did so by drawing on a semi-structured interview study with agency temps to gather their voices about their career realities. This insight is needed, because we first need to understand in-depth what nontraditional workers can do or cannot do themselves, on the individual level. The sustainable career framework acknowledges that a sustainable career is realized by the interplay between person, context, and time, but is it still unclear which contextual factors play exactly what roles. For example, Kost et al. (2020) have shown that workers in the gig economy are heavily constrained in realizing their boundaryless careers by themselves due to the lack of competency development and developmental training in the gig economy. Further, the uncertainty and income instability nontraditional workers are encountering has been named by Ashford et al. (2018) and Cropanzano et al. (2023) as a difficulty for the individual to navigate one's career, questioning the power these workers have to rely on their own agency (Akkermans & Hirschi, 2023; Forrier, 2023). Therefore, this study contributes new knowledge by seeking to understand what career self-management (Hirschi &

Koen, 2021; King, 2004) looks like for vulnerable nontraditional workers having highly unstable employment. Further, this is the first paper in the agency work literature to look beyond push/pull motives (Lopes & Chambel, 2017) to deepen our understanding of these vulnerable workers' lived experiences.

1.5.3 Chapter 4: When People Bite the Hand That Feeds Them: An Ethnographic Study of Triadic Social Exchanges in the Gig Economy

Investigating how career behaviors in a group of exchanging workers is impacted by having an algorithm as a 'boss'. The dissertation's third study aims to understand how nontraditional workers experiences their work on the group level. In stable organizational hierarchical setting, workers are surrounded by other humans. Yet, for nontraditional workers there is an algorithm that is mediating the work (Duggan et al., 2020), thereby likely impacting the interactions workers have with the platform and with each other. That is, the work coordination is not done by a human boss but by an algorithm showing an inherently different way to organize work. Therefore, research is needed to understand how this new way of organizing plays out in the interactions. To understand the interactions nontraditional workers encounter, we draw on social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Social exchange theory has been helpful in explaining workers' attitudes and behaviors in dyadic relationships in bureaucratic hierarchical organizations (Cropanzano et al., 2017). However, platform-mediated work is challenging prior insights because its new way of organizing work via platform mediation is leading to fragmented work and short-term contracts lasting tor only one gig. Therefore, this study complements the insights on the individual level in *Chapter 3* with insights on the group level in this chapter. In addition to reconceptualizing social exchanges (Cropanzano et al., 2017) in a hyper-flexible and multi-party context, we add to gig work literature (cf. Ashford et al., 2018; Vallas & Schor, 2020) by showing how nontraditional workers experience their interactions with the platform and with each other.

1.5.4 Chapter 5: A multi-stakeholder approach to stimulating sustainable careers for contingent workers: Mapping paradoxes and actionable desirable futures

Building sustainable careers for nontraditional workers with stakeholders from the organizational and institutional context. The last study of this dissertation, presented in *Chapter 5*, aims to understand how context is shaping sustainable careers for nontraditional workers. Thereby, this study further elevates the insights on context, by adding to the group level in *Chapter 4*, also the organizational and institutional levels. The sustainable career framework highlights the importance of drawing on different contextual levels to investigate sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020). The literature does not yet have answers regarding how stakeholders around the nontraditional worker can lead the way to build sustainable careers. This is problematic. Nontraditional workers must navigate a volatile career environment, and their employment relations are characterized by a risk redistribution from the organization to the individual—possibly leading to precarious careers. Therefore, and in contrast to previous research in the nontraditional work literature taking a retrospective view in theorizing, this study takes a forward-looking approach and co-creates an actionable desirable future (Gümüsay & Reinecke, 2022) for the careers of nontraditional workers. To do so, I organized a "future-oriented lab" session with multiple stakeholders around the nontraditional worker, such as policy makers, HR managers at client organizations, labor union representatives, and directors at agency organizations and platforms. I mapped out paradoxes stakeholders encounter and propose actionable routes to more desirable futures. This study contributes to the sustainable career literature (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden et al., 2020) by specifying the contextual layer of the framework.

Further, this study adds to the leadership literature (Schneider, 2002; Sutherland et al., 2022) in terms of nontraditional work and new ways of organizing work by identifying paradoxes and proposing actionable futures.

Table 1.1 Overview of studies in this dissertation

Chapter	Title	Method	Sample	Thesis output
2	Toward a sustainable career perspective on contingent work: a critical review and a research agenda	Critical review, providing a conceptual new perspective	Overview of previous empirical research	Retkowsky, J., Nijs, S., Akkermans, J., Jansen, P., & Khapova, S. N. (2023a). Toward a sustainable career perspective on contingent work: a critical review and a research agenda. ***Career Development International,*** *28*(1), 1-18. **Received Outstanding Paper Award (winner) – Emerald Literati Awards (2024)** Presented at: *Academy of Management Annual Meeting* (Boston, 2019) *Dutch HRM conference* (Tilburg, 2019) *CarCon conference* (Vienna, 2020)
3	Seeking stability in unstable employment: An exploratory study of temporary agency workers' career self-management	Ground theory	In-depth interviews with agency temps n=27	Retkowsky, J., Nijs, S., Akkermans, J., Khapova, S., & Jansen, P. (2023b). Seeking stability in unstable employment: An exploratory study of temporary agency workers' career self-management. ***Journal of Vocational Behavior***, *143*, 103877. Presented at: *Onderzoek en Beleid Bijeenkomst van Instituut Gak* (Hilversum, 2022) *Academy of Management Annual Meeting* (Seattle, 2022)
4	When People Bite the Hand that Feeds Them: An Ethnographic Study of Triadic Social Exchanges in the Gig Economy	Grounded theory	Ethnographic study: n=75 interviews, 80 hours of shadowing, and over 300 social media posts	R&R at ***Academy of Management Journal*** Presented at: *Amsterdam Business Research Institute* (PhD Day) in 2022 *e-HRM conference* (Aarhus, 2022) *Onderzoek en Beleid Bijeenkomst van Instituut Gak* (Hilversum, 2022) *Academy of Management Annual Meeting* (Seattle, 2022)
5	A multi-stakeholder approach to stimulating sustainable careers for contingent workers: Mapping paradoxes and actionable desirable futures	Co-creating desirable futures, participatory research	'Future-oriented lab' with n=50 expert stakeholders	Retkowsky, J., Akkermans, J., Nijs, S., Jansen, P., & Khapova, S. (2024). Stimuleren van duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers: Paradoxen en routes naar een wenselijke toekomst vanuit het perspectief van belanghebbenden. ***Gedrag & Organisatie***, *37*(2), 191-221. Presented at: *Onderzoek en Beleid Bijeenkomst van Instituut Gak* (Amsterdam, 2023)

Chapter 2

Toward a sustainable career perspective on contingent work: A critical review and a research agenda

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a synthesis of the contingent work field and to advocate a sustainable career perspective on contingent work.

Design/methodology/approach – Adopting a broader review approach allowed to synthesize the contingent work literature across contingent work types (temporary agency work, gig work and freelance work) and develop a sustainable career perspective on contingent work. The authors searched for empirical, conceptual and review articles published from 2008 to December 2021. In total, the authors included 208 articles.

Findings – The authors advocate a sustainable career perspective that allows for organizing and synthesizing the fragmented contingent work literature. Adopting a sustainable career perspective enables to study contingent work from a dynamic perspective transcending one single organization.

Originality/value – The field is suffering from fragmentation and most importantly from an oversight of how contingent work experiences play a role in a persons' career. This paper addresses this problem by adopting a sustainable career perspective on contingent work.

Keywords: Contingent work, Alternative work arrangements, Nonstandard work, Gig work, Temporary work, Temporary agency work, Freelance work, Career, Sustainable career

Paper type Literature review

Published as: Retkowsky, J., Nijs, S., Akkermans, J., Jansen, P., & Khapova, S. N. (2023a). Toward a sustainable career perspective on contingent work: a critical review and a research agenda. *Career Development International, 28*(1), 1-18.

2.1 Introduction

Contingent work (i.e. workers who have short-term contracts with organizations; Katz and Krueger, 2019) is a defining characteristic of today's labor markets. To illustrate, in Europe in 2020, 10.5% of workers were contingent (Eurostat, 2021). Similarly, 10% of all workers in the United States are contingent workers (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

Moreover, the context in which contingent workers operate is changing (e.g. Ashford et al., 2018). For example, labor market intermediaries (LMIs), which connect contingent workers to work available in the labor market (Bonet et al., 2013), are a new, rapidly emerging type of organization. The most familiar LMIs are online platforms in the gig economy, such as Uber or Upwork, which are replacing the human resource (HR) function in the world of work outside traditional employment relationships (Duggan et al., 2020; Meijerink and Keegan, 2019). Taken together, these changes highlight that the contingent work phenomenon has become a prevailing characteristic of today's labor markets (De Cuyper et al., 2011) and has significantly increased in complexity with the introduction of LMIs and the gig economy.

The societal prevalence and increasing complexity of the contingent work phenomenon have coevolved with a proliferation of research on how contingent work influences people's work experiences. Several systematic reviews and conceptual papers have been published examining, for example, the psychological impact of short-term contracts (Ashford et al., 2007; Connelly and Gallagher, 2004a; De Cuyper et al., 2008, 2011; Feldman, 2006) and the influence of technology on the contingent work experience (Jabagi et al., 2019; Meijerink and Keegan, 2019). However, the steep increase in research has not led to a more integrated understanding of the phenomenon because research is conducted in different research streams that are barely connected (cf. Ashford et al., 2007; Burke and Van

Stel, 2011). Since those different streams all tend to use their own terminologies and concepts, we argue that the increase in research has led to less rather than more conceptual clarity and consistency. Hence, a synthesis of those research streams could further stimulate the development of knowledge on contingent work and help researchers to position their work in current (fragmented) debates in the literature.

The circulation of different terms in the literature—typically coined within different disciplines—to denote contingent work illustrates the fragmentation of the literature. For example, nonstandard work (i.e. sociology), atypical work (i.e. OB) and alternative work arrangements (i.e. OB and HRM) are used interchangeably as general denotations for contingent work (Kalleberg, 2000; Selenko et al., 2018). Contrary to these more generic terms, different terms are used for contingent work in specific work contexts. Cappelli and Keller's (2013) influential classification illustrates this, as it is "informed by and reflects the legal distinction[s]" (Cappelli and Keller, 2013, p. 575). Drawing on Cappelli and Keller, as well as Kuhn and Maleki (2017), researchers distinguish temporary workers, agency workers, freelancers (also referred to as independent professionals, contractors, solopreneurs or self-employed workers, gig workers, platform, or on-demand workers), on-call workers and seasonal workers as distinct contingent worker types. Overall, there is considerable conceptual complexity and inconsistency in the area of contingent work.

In this paper, we use contingent work as a generic term for flexible work as contingent work is still the most commonly used term, particularly among organizational behavior (OB) and human resource management (HRM) scholars (Connelly & Gallagher, 2004a). However, we acknowledge the consensus is continuously shifting in this rapidly advancing field. For example, in their recent article, Caza et al. (2022) proposed using gig work, which is typically characterized as online platform-mediated work, as a new umbrella term for contingent work. Given that contingent work is still the most common umbrella term at the time of writing this article, we use this term. In addition, we refer to gig work as a collection of activities involving microtasks mediated by an online platform (see also Cropanzano et al., 2022).

Besides a lack of interdisciplinary connections and consistency, another noteworthy observation is that most of the literature has focused on contingent workers' work experience during their work at one organization (e.g. Allen, 2011; Guest et al., 2010). Given the increased prevalence of LMIs that connect contingent workers to multiple organizations over time, the dominant focus on studying one single organization is problematic. This focus has limitations because it ignores contingent workers' experiences across organizations and between the phases of employment. Contingent workers operate "'in-between' spaces, betwixt and between work roles, organizations and career paths" (Ashford et al., 2018, p. 25). Therefore, we propose a career perspective that does justice to the complex reality of contingent work. Arthur et al. (1989, p. 8) defined a career as "the unfolding sequence of a person's work experiences over time." Hence, a career perspective enables a temporal, personal and contextual understanding of their needs. In addition, practitioners and policymakers increasingly discuss how to support contingent workers throughout their careers in the new world of work (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016); thus, we must generate a more thorough understanding of their careers.

To address this problem, we advocate a sustainable career perspective (De Vos et al., 2020) that allows for synthesizing the contingent work literature. We use the sustainable career lens to analyze and critically review the fragmented contingent work literature. Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015) defined sustainable careers as "sequences of career experiences reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, thereby crossing several social spaces, characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual" (p. 7). De Vos et al. (2020) argue that three dimensions are central to analyzing career sustainability: person, context and time. Applied to contingent work, the person dimension looks at characteristics of the contingent worker (e.g. perceptions, agency) that influence the work experience; the context dimension highlights the situational factors (e.g. organization, sector) at play in the contingent worker's work experience; and the time dimension highlights changes over time (e.g. shocks, transitions) that shape contingent workers' career experiences (cf. De Vos et al., 2020). These three dimensions actively interact with each other to shape career sustainability, characterized by the indicators of happiness, health and productivity across the lifespan. For example, specific competencies or behaviors may be more or less effective in safeguarding one's career sustainability in different organizations and countries (i.e. context) and in various life and career stages (i.e. time).

In all, the main contribution of this article is therefore to propose a career perspective on contingent work research based on a sustainable career perspective (De Vos et al., 2020), which is well-suited to move the field forward. This lens enables us to organize the contingent work literature and offer an integrative framework of contingent work by focusing on contingent workers' career experiences (Baruch and Sullivan, 2022; De Cuyper et al., 2011) instead of describing only experiences in one organization, based on the type of contingent work performed (cf. Cappelli and Keller, 2013; Guest et al., 2010; Van den Tooren and de Jong, 2014). Therefore, this career perspective presents an overview of patterns in contingent work research, as well as identifies opportunities for future research on sustainable careers of contingent workers. This helps both contingent work and career researchers to further theorize on the interplays between person, context and time (Ancona et al., 2001) in contingent workers' careers as well as developing practical implications for supporting contingent workers' career pathways.

2.2 Method

We deliberately chose a broader review approach that allowed us to critically review the fragmented contingent work literature (Brawley, 2017). In particular, we searched for terms referring to contingent work (e.g. contingent work, alternative work arrangements, temporary work, flexible employment, gig work and nonstandard work). Next to adopting these umbrella terms in our search strategy, we also searched for articles dealing with one specific type of contingent worker such as freelancer, independent professional, independent contractor, agency worker, on-call worker or gig worker. Specifically, based on the frequency of publications on these topics until 2008 (see details about this year below), we identified the following scholarly disciplines as the most relevant to our review: applied psychology (e.g. Journal of Organizational Behavior), management (e.g. Human Resource Management Journal), sociology (e.g. Work, Employment and Society) and entrepreneurship (e.g. Small Business Economics). Our inclusion criterion was that an article's central theme should deal with the experiences of contingent workers. In 2008, the last review article appeared that extensively synthesized empirical studies across contingent workers and their attitudes and behaviors (De Cuyper et al., 2008). To ensure we captured the relevant developments in this fragmented field, we searched for empirical, conceptual and review articles published from 2008 to December 2021. In total, we included 208 articles. Although we are confident that our search strategy resulted in articles that represent the fragmented field of contingent work, we by no means claim to be exhaustive in the articles we include. The aim of our study is not to systematically review the existing body of literature, but to critically review the patterns in the literature and provide a career perspective that can help organize the fragmented literature and guide future research endeavors. Full details about our 208 included articles can be found in the online supplementary material.

2.3 Applying a sustainable career perspective to reorganize the contingent work literature

We organize the contingent work literature based on the sustainable career framework (De Vos et al., 2020). This framework is valuable for several reasons. First, the contingent work literature is fragmented within and across multiple disciplines, which all tend to use their own terminologies and concepts. This issue makes the comparability of these literatures difficult, hence hindering the scholarly development in the field. Second, existing research on contingent work has over-emphasized studying (cross-sectional) snapshots of contingent work experiences, even though these experiences all occur as a part of these workers' career paths. These two problems can be solved by adopting a sustainable career perspective to analyze and organize the contingent work literature because it creates a common language that allows scholars from different disciplines to share their insights with each other. For example, psychologists have primarily studied individual experiences of contingent work, whereas sociologists have prioritized how their work context makes them a precarious group. Analyzed from a sustainable career perspective, this allows psychologists and sociologists to study how the person and their context may interact to shape contingent workers' career experiences. Second, temporal processes are inherent to a sustainable career perspective, thus allowing scholars to analyze contingent work experiences across people's working lives. Such a perspective can provide more insight into the key antecedents, mechanisms and boundary conditions impacting contingent workers' careers. In the next section, we organize the literature along the three dimensions of the sustainable career framework: person, context and time and detect patterns in the current body of literature on contingent work. Note that when coding the articles, they could be coded into multiple dimensions. For example, if a study included both individual and contextual factors, this article would be relevant for both dimensions. See Figure 2.1 for an overview.

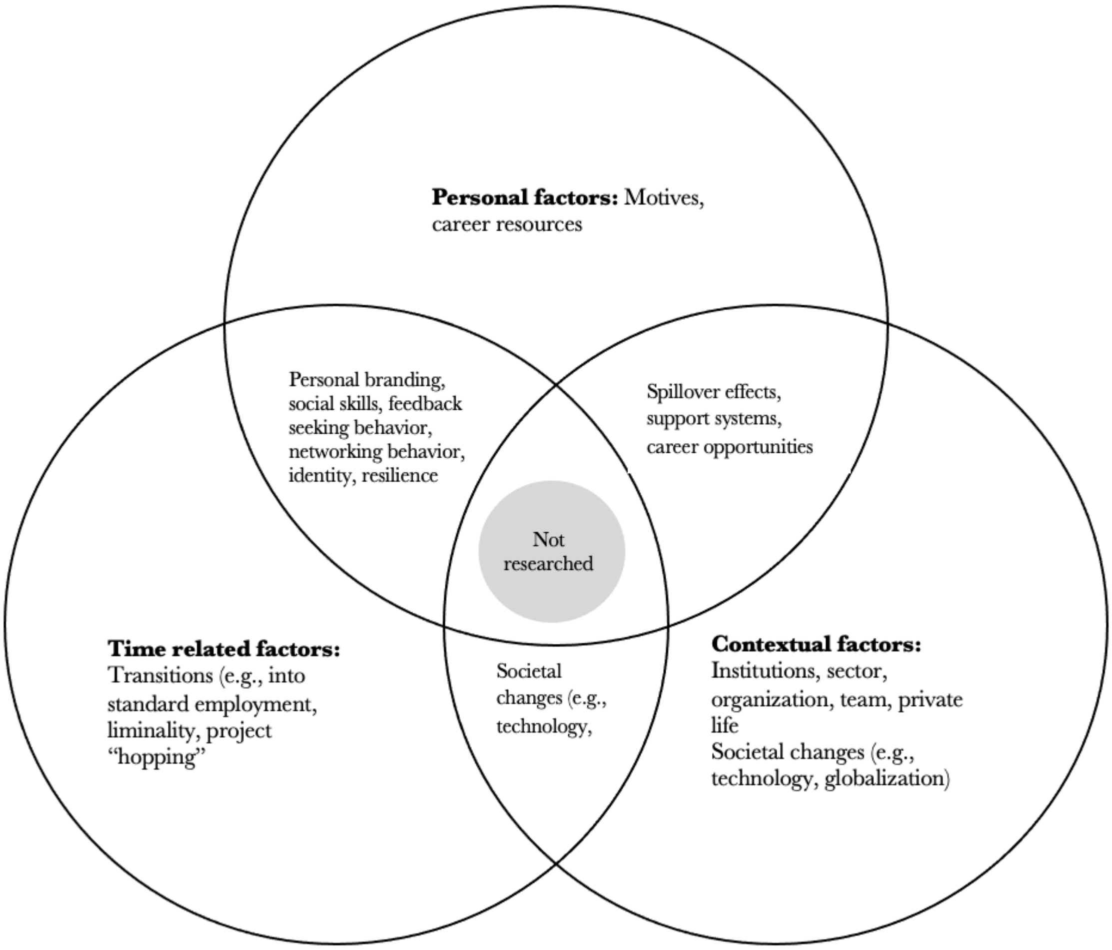


Figure 2.1 Topical overview of existing contingent work research organized according to the sustainable career

2.3.1 Person dimension: individual as an agent

The person dimension reflects the role of individual career actors as the primary agents responsible for their career sustainability. Organizing the contingent work literature within the person dimension, we recognize two different streams that have evolved separately: (1) a well-established literature regarding personal motives to engage in contingent work and (2) a nascent literature regarding contingent workers' career resources.

We found that a literature stream has evolved around motives to engage in contingent work (cf. Bernhard-Oettel et al., 2008; Sobral et al., 2019). Important motives for engaging in contingent work – often referred to as push/pull factors – can be traced back to being voluntary or involuntary in the flexible contract situation (Keith et al., 2019; Lopes and Chambel, 2017; Sobral et al., 2019). Motives are complex due to several push (e.g. increased autonomy regarding when and where to work, higher earnings) and pull (e.g. having no choice, use it as a stepping stone to attain secure employment) factors (Sobral et al., 2019). Studies show that when workers are pushed into contingent work, it leads to negative outcomes, such as decreased job satisfaction and well-being (Lopes and Chambel, 2017). These findings show that pushed contingent workers are at risk in the labor market.

The second literature stream focuses on career resources. The fact that contingent workers need to maintain their workstream constantly because of their short-term work relationships creates the need to develop resources to help them navigate their careers. Specifically, career resources are factors that enable an individual to be resilient and in control of their career (cf. Hirschi, 2012). For example, career competencies and career adaptability are necessary career resources that constitute a contingent worker's career potential. Career competencies are knowledge, skills and abilities essential for career development (Akkermans et al., 2013), and career adaptability is defined as a psychological resource to cope with uncontrollable external events, such as transitions (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012). Several studies on contingent work have, often implicitly, studied such career resources. For example, social skills (Galais and Moser, 2018) and feedback-seeking behavior (Lapalme et al., 2017) among agency workers were positively related to attaining permanent employment. Self- profiling and career control among agency workers were positively related to informal learning (Preenen et al., 2015). Furthermore, freelancers' networking behavior related positively to career success (Jacobs et al., 2019; Van den Born and van Witteloostuijn, 2013). Personal branding can also be a tool for freelancers to acquire future projects and nurture the entrepreneurial self (Gandini, 2016; Sutherland et al., 2020; Vallas and Christin, 2018). In addition, an entrepreneurial orientation helps gig workers experience meaningful work (Nemkova et al., 2019). Finally, resilience, internal locus of control, emotional stability, self- efficacy and capabilities such as cognitive flexibility and learning agility were introduced by Ashford et al. (2018) and McKeown and Pichault (2020) as essential resources for gig workers and freelancers.

Taken together, contingent work research at the individual level has predominately focused on personal motives and, to a lesser extent, on contingent workers' career resources (albeit implicitly). Such findings align with sustainable career thinking in the sense that contingent workers' personal characteristics, such as motivation and career resources, are at the core of their career sustainability. Yet, the finding that pushed contingent workers are in a risk group shows that some careers of contingent workers are inherently at risk for featuring long-term career unsustainability when workers lack career resources (Bal et al., 2020; Kost et al., 2020).

2.3.2 Context dimension: structural factors in contingent workers' careers

In the career literature, several scholars have argued that context is essential for understanding career experiences because careers do not evolve in a vacuum (e.g. Inkson et al., 2012). Contingent workers are, by definition, in a volatile environment characterized by the absence of a stable organizational membership over time (Caza et al., 2022) – making it imperative for researchers to capture contextual insights into their careers. The context dimension of the career sustainability paradigm highlights various contextual layers as important structural factors in the work environment, such as the organizational, group, private life, occupational sector and institutional levels (De Vos et al., 2020). Specifically, these different contextual layers are essential because they are crucial elements that contribute to distinct contingent worker career experiences.

One commonality for all contingent workers is that they operate in a context beyond organizational boundaries (Spreitzer et al., 2017). Contingent workers either have two employers simultaneously (e.g. agency workers and on-call workers), or they work with multiple clients and platforms simultaneously (e.g. freelancers and gig workers). Thus, it is crucial to look beyond organizational boundaries to investigate (1) how complex relations encompassing multiple organizations and technological advancement supersede the traditional organizational level and (2) how various levels, such as group, private life, occupational sector and institutional, influence contingent workers' career experiences. Next, we organize contingent work research according to the different layers of context discussed in sustainable career research.

Synthesizing the contingent work literature at the organizational level, we recognize several studies that have contributed to explaining unique organizational contextual factors that influence contingent workers' career experiences. To illustrate the influence of multiple organizations, we found studies focusing on agency workers that examined the triangular relationship between client organization, agency organization and agency workers. For instance, studies investigated HRM practice outcomes such as commitment, psychological contract fulfillment, perceived organizational support, organizational citizenship behaviors and counterproductive workplace behaviors by applying them to the triangular relationship

(Connelly et al., 2011; Galais and Moser, 2009; Giunchi et al., 2015). These studies found that both the client and agency organizations are critical contextual factors that influence agency worker career experiences. Hence, contingent workers' careers are influenced by the multiple work relations in which they are embedded.

We found additional studies regarding the influence of organizational contextual factors in the literature on gig work. For example, several studies outline how organizational HRM practices are perceived differently by gig workers, which, in turn, are likely to shape their work experiences (Connelly et al., 2021; Jabagi et al., 2019; Meijerink and Keegan, 2019). Organizational HRM practices are important in shaping the general "employment relationship" (Van De Voorde et al., 2012). However, conceptualizing organizational HRM practices in work relationships that include at least three parties – the gig worker, requesters/clients and the online platform provider – is complex in the gig economy. For instance, performance systems are replaced by online, platform-based client rating systems (Duggan et al., 2020; Meijerink and Keegan, 2019), whereby ratings can be perceived differently depending on the design of the rating system. While positive feedback via high ratings is likely to increase the perceived competence of a gig worker, algorithmic punishments are likely to have adverse effects on the gig worker's career experiences (Jabagi et al., 2019; Nemkova et al., 2019).

Across much of the gig economy, algorithmic management is used to control workers. It decreases gig workers' independence on platforms and constrains horizontal and vertical transitions (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Wood et al., 2019). Such work unleashes the disruptive role of technology in contingent work relations (Brawley and Pury, 2016). Workers are managed on platforms via algorithms resulting in a reconfiguration of the traditional employment relationship (Duggan et al., 2020; Kellogg et al., 2020). This reconfiguration of the traditional employment relationship leads to a diffusion of responsibilities at the platforms and clients regarding who is in charge to support gig workers' careers (Kost et al., 2020; Rahman and Valentine, 2021). The lacking identification of an employer for gig workers (Stewart and Stanford, 2017) shows the importance of applying a network view consisting of the platforms, clients/customers and gig workers' themselves to understand career development in the gig economy.

Although the organizational level has been studied extensively in the contingent work area, research on the group-, private life-, occupational sector- and institutional levels is less developed. Specifically, contingent work research has tried to understand contingent workers' career experiences by directly integrating the team and private life dynamics (i.e. by incorporating specific concepts on that level in study designs). Yet, the institutional and occupational sector levels have received less scholarly attention or were merely indirectly addressed (i.e. by not integrating explicit concepts on that level in study designs).

As a consequence of contingent workers' working beyond organizational boundaries, dynamics on the group level can unfold in different ways. Contingent workers can be prone to be excluded from their team by their current "employer" or client (McKeown and Pichault, 2020). For instance, contingent workers working in blended teams consisting of contingent workers and traditional workers receive little advice and develop few friendship networks within the team. Furthermore, they might be stigmatized (Boyce et al., 2007; Wilkin et al., 2018). This indicates that contingent workers likely face unique group-related obstacles in their career. In contrast with contingent workers working in teams, others working alone have been referred to as micro-entrepreneurs. Specifically, gig workers primarily work alone without any team (Friedman, 2014). Building connections, often facilitated through internet-based communities, with peers who both engage in contingent work and work alone, can create supportive environments which decrease anxiety and foster productivity and creativity (Petriglieri et al., 2019; Schwartz, 2018). To illustrate, coworking spaces can function as a modern social environment to meet like-minded people and foster social support among contingent workers (Gerdenitsch et al., 2016). Further, Tassinari and Maccarrone (2020) discuss active solidarity and the emergence of collective action among gig workers working on food delivery platforms. In addition, Gegenhuber et al. (2021) found a range of voice mechanisms for gig workers on other platforms. These potential stigmatizations and support systems show that group dynamics can lead to upward and downward cycles in contingent workers' careers.

Organizing the studies on the private life level, we note that this level of analysis is crucial to understand the career experiences of contingent workers because of spillover effects between the professional and non-professional spheres (De Hauw and Greenhaus, 2015). Contingent workers tend to struggle with work and non-work boundaries because they often work irregular hours (Gold and Mustafa, 2013). Shevchuk et al. (2019) put forward that gig workers' nonstandard work hours adversely affect their life partnerships and caregiving responsibilities. In addition, contingent workers' lack of stable income can put them into precarious financial situations (Butler and Stoyanova Russell, 2018), causing insecurities that spill over to families and households (Kalleberg, 2009). Specifically, decisions on critical events in a contingent worker's private life, such as family formation or marriage, can affect their career sustainability.

The occupational sector level has only been indirectly addressed in the contingent work literature, except for two recent studies showing that lawyers experience lower professional status when working on online labor platforms (Yao, 2020) and photographers experienced that platforms undercut their professional status (McDonald et al., 2021). The indirect role of occupational sector has been addressed by, for example, several studies that examined career experiences of food delivery riders and taxi drivers (Duggan et al., 2021; Ravenelle, 2019) and freelance workers in the IT and creative sectors (e.g. McKeown and

Pichault, 2020; Petriglieri et al., 2019). From a career perspective, it is important to understand how contingent workers can face unique career opportunities and obstacles in different sectors. For example, a case study on contingent workers using Upwork found that the platform introduced barriers for them, such as capped wages and intensive performance pressure, due to the high global labor supply in the creative sector (Popiel, 2017). In contrast, professional status can be a source of security for contingent workers in the health care sector (Wall, 2015).

Finally, how the institutional level can influence contingent workers' career experiences is unexplored yet, promises exciting insights. For example, freelancers and gig workers do not automatically have any social protection (e.g. health care and sickness benefits, unemployment benefits). This lack of social security implies that they need to manage their social risks themselves. However, not all of them are taking action in this regard, which can influence their long-term career sustainability (Friedman, 2014).

To conclude, organizing the contingent work literature into the sustainable career context dimension shows the importance of looking at contextual factors beyond the traditional organization. This emphasis on the role of context in sustainable careers allowed us to organize the literature (cf. De Vos et al., 2020) and introduce a common contextual language for the disparate perspectives on contingent work (i.e. organizational, group, private life, occupational-sector and institutional levels). These multiple levels are essential and need to be considered when analyzing contingent workers' career sustainability.

2.3.3 Time dimension: changes in contingent workers' career experiences

De Vos et al. (2020) advocate a dynamic perspective on sustainable careers, whereby time can have different meanings for distinct types of workers, such as contingent workers. In particular, contingent workers operate in a dynamic environment due to their short-term contracts. When contingent workers finish one contract or job situation, they may experience various transitions. For example, they may transition from contingent work to unemployment, from contingent work to traditional employment or continuing with contingent work (e.g. moving to a new temporary client). Based on all these possibilities, contingent workers will likely accumulate widely varied work experience over time (Clinton et al., 2011), which results in multiple dynamic career pathways. Therefore, although contingent work research has predominantly focused on snapshots of one moment in time, the sustainable career lens shows that contingent work experiences need to be studied from a temporal perspective (Ancona et al., 2001).

Based on our literature review, we identified a "stepping stone" concept that examines transitions into traditional employment and suggests that some contingent workers see their first contingent work project as a stepping stone to traditional employment in an organization. However, research shows that only some workers successfully manage the transition, while others remain in contingent work (Esteban-Pretel et al., 2011). Furthermore, not all contingent workers have the same likelihood to transition successfully: temporary workers seem to benefit from the contingent work stepping stone more than agency workers or freelancers (Berton et al., 2011; Givord and Wilner, 2015). Contingent workers engaged in agency work for an extended time reported lower well-being both in the workplace and outside work than those beginning the agency work (Chambel and Sobral, 2019). For contingent workers, performing low-skilled "gigs" in the gig economy, their transitions to the outside of the gig economy are likely to be constrained. Their often complex diverse career pathways can be interpreted as unfocused by HR managers outside of the gig economy decreasing the likelihood to be hired (Kost et al., 2020). Taken together, these findings suggest that the dynamic processes and long-term career impacts of contingent work on those who aspire to obtain traditional employment are critical, yet not well understood.

Another concept introduced in this regard is liminality, as it is important in explaining contingent workers' career experiences. For example, after a project has finished, some contingent workers do not move into another working position and are instead in an in-between phase. Liminality is characterized as a phase in which workers face high uncertainty about their future work situation (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016), which is a key part of the contingent work experience (Winkler and Mahmood, 2015). These in-between phases of unemployment lead to emotional highs and lows among contingent workers (Rowlands and Handy, 2012). Hence, we emphasize that liminality needs to be considered as a temporal factor because it is an in-between phase that shapes contingent workers' dynamic work experiences over time (Ancona et al., 2001). To have a sustainable career as a contingent worker, it is a key skill to manage intense varying emotions caused by the volatile career environment (Caza et al., 2022).

2.4 Moving contingent work research forward: interplays between person, context and time

Figure 2.1 shows that although we identified research on every dimension, there is a lack of research incorporating all three dimensions. This is problematic because, in career experiences, person, context and time constantly interact (De Vos et al., 2020). Therefore, we now use the organizing framework of sustainable careers to elaborate on several avenues for studying contingent workers' careers at the intersection of these three dimensions.

Specifically, we highlight four concepts that promise to shed light on the person, context and time interplay in contingent workers' career experiences: person-career-fit, career shocks, employability and flexicurity. We chose these specific topics because person-career-fit, career shocks and employability have already been frequently addressed within a career sustainability framework (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden et al., 2020). These topics are likely of particular value for understanding the career experiences of contingent workers functioning in a volatile environment. Although to date not explicitly researched from a sustainable career framework, the concept of flexicurity aligns nicely with the underlying idea of the framework as it acknowledges that person, context and time interact in shaping experiences. More specifically, studying flexicurity can unravel how institutional and legislative factors shape career experiences and add value by placing the experiences of contingent workers in their wider institutional context. Table 2.1 provides an overview.

2.4.1 Person-career-fit

The key mechanism bringing the three sustainable career dimensions together is the notion of dynamic person-career-fit, which is the degree to which a worker's career aligns with their needs and personal values (De Vos et al., 2020). Sustainable career development is an idiosyncratic process in which contingent workers demonstrate agency in striving for person-career fit over time and are impacted by contextual factors. De Jager et al. (2016) and Brawley (2017) argued that we need to understand the unique factors and contingent workers' needs that influence contingent workers' person-career-fit. The multiple employers or clients that contingent workers interact with can, over time, play a role by constraining or nurturing person-career-fit. For example, gig workers may voluntarily engage in gig work for a limited amount of time and experience high levels of person-career fit. Yet, agency workers likely experience lower levels of person-career fit even in shorter periods because they often strive for a permanent contract with an employer. Studying these processes from a dynamic

Table 2.1 New research directions and exploratory research questions based on a sustainable career perspective

Person-career-fit	• Which personal and contextual factors enable or hinder contingent workers from achieving person-career fit over time? • How do contingent workers at different life stages encounter distinct barriers and enablers to achieving person-career fit? • How do contingent workers form and manage their multiple commitments to organizations over time? How does it influence their careers if they do not align their various commitments? What is the nature of these alignments or misalignments?	• Delphi study to identify relevant stakeholders with their constraining or supporting 'power' on contingent workers over time • Ethnographic studies to examine how the interplay between personal and contextual factors of contingent workers' career experience evolve over time • Longitudinal within-person and between-person studies to identify antecedents, outcomes, mechanisms, and boundary conditions related to person-career fit
Career shocks	• What career shocks do contingent workers experience? • What are the short-term and long-term consequences of these career shocks? • How do contingent workers cope with negative career shocks and capitalize on positive career shocks?	• In-depth interviews to explore the different types of career shocks among contingent workers • Quantitative process methods (e.g., growth modeling, latent profile analysis) to examine the distinct sequences of short-term and long-term consequences
Employ-ability	• Why do some contingent workers manage to build a portfolio over time, based on their sequences of projects, and thereby increase their employability, while others do not? • How can employability be enhanced over time across multiple organizations? • What type of social and economic resources are exchanged between contingent workers and their stakeholders contributing to their employability enhancement?	• In-depth interviews to explore constraints and enablers of employability enhancement • Process methods to analyze upwards and downwards cycles over time which unfold through the interplay of personal (e.g., motives, career resources) and contextual (e.g., sector) factors • Longitudinal studies to understand intrapersonal differences in the employability of contingent workers based on personal and contextual factors
Flexi-curity	• How can flexicurity systems be designed to stimulate sustainable career experiences? • How do different legislations influence the career experiences of contingent workers?	• Case studies on countries that have advanced flexicurity polices to examine how they can foster career sustainability • Comparative studies on flexicurity policies across countries

and systemic perspective (De Vos et al., 2020) allows for a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary understanding of contingent workers' career experiences.

Furthermore, we propose that there is a potential polarization between the strong (e.g. more pulled) and weak (e.g. more pushed) contingent workers; that is, there may be a so-called Matthew effect at play (cf. Forrier et al., 2018). Some contingent workers are likely to attain and strengthen their person-career-fit by capitalizing on their career resources over time (Ashford et al., 2018), while others may lack access to career resources due to structural factors, such as missing structure regarding working time, income instability, or major power asymmetries in work relationships (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016), resulting in a further decline of person-career fit. Therefore, we encourage researchers to examine the development of contingent workers' person-career (mis)fit to understand their distinct career trajectories better.

2.4.2 Career shocks

Future research should also examine career shocks among contingent workers to understand the interaction of the person, context and time dimensions. Career shocks are disruptive events that cause deliberate career reflection and potential changes in contingent workers' careers (Akkermans et al., 2018). Such shocks have a demonstrably strong impact on workers' career decisions (Seibert et al., 2013) and career success (Blokker et al., 2019). Furthermore, career shocks significantly impact entrepreneurs' career decision-making (Rummel et al., 2021). Consequently, we expect contingent workers to be particularly prone to career shocks due to many different career experiences, such as transitioning between jobs and projects and facing financial and employment insecurity. Recent examples particularly salient for contingent workers' careers are the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the Great Resignation trend, which, for many contingent workers, has triggered short-term and long-term career changes (Akkermans et al., 2020; Spurk and Straub, 2020). While these developments have influenced all workers, contingent workers are especially influenced due to their precarious working conditions and regular job and career transitions. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic may be a source to amplify the resilience or vulnerability of contingent workers (Spurk and Straub, 2020). Similarly, the Great Resignation has triggered many career transitions, possibly also between paid employment and contingent work, or between different types of contingent work. Studying such career shock-induced career transitions would be a fruitful way forward to studying contingent workers' careers.

For this reason, we advocate that analyzing career shocks impacting contingent workers helps us to understand complex and dynamic contingent work experiences over time. Career shock is a fruitful concept to study person, context and time interactions, as it allows capturing across contexts disruptive events that can significantly impact contingent workers' career sustainability. Hence, we hope that contingent work and career scholars will start to examine how and why career shocks can impact contingent workers' careers.

2.4.3 Employability

There is a need for studies that examine how employability can be a securing anchor for contingent workers in their careers. Employability is the likelihood of finding a new job in the labor market (Forrier et al., 2015) and is considered a panacea to overcome job insecurity in the fading parenting relationship between organizations and workers (Forrier and Sels, 2003; Kinnunen et al., 2011). Yet, how contingent workers can become and stay employable in the long run is a complex issue (Barnes et al., 2015; Fugate et al., 2021; Kovalenko and Mortelmans, 2016). For instance, organizations often do not invest in enriching contingent workers' employability due to the short-term work relationship. Thus, a key future avenue is to examine how contingent workers' employability enhancement can be achieved across multiple employment relationships over time. Such studies can theorize about employability related to social exchanges arising from the interdependence of contingent workers and their stakeholders (e.g. colleagues, clients, LMIs, institutions) (Chambel and Sobral, 2011; Forrier et al., 2018; Fugate et al., 2021). As multiple stakeholders make up the context of contingent workers, studies that take a multistakeholder approach and study how we can make employability enhancement a shared responsibility are especially helpful (Barnes et al., 2015; Chambel and Sobral, 2011). Hence, employability is a well-suited concept to study the sustainable career perspective's person, context and time interaction because contingent workers' employability development across their career is a shared responsibility between contingent workers and their stakeholders (Kost et al., 2020).

2.4.4 Flexicurity

A final avenue for future research is studying flexicurity and contingent work. Flexicurity is an institutional-level concept. Wilthagen and Tros (2004) state that the concept of flexicurity is roughly defined as the nexus of flexibility and security. Stated differently, flexicurity is about strategies to simultaneously enhance flexibility and security in the labor market. Thereby, security can take three forms: (1) job security, (2) employment security, or (3) income security. Specific flexicurity designs vary among institutional legal national systems, such as the number of short-term contracts a contingent worker can have from the same "employing" organization in a row, as the flexibility-security matrix is shaped differently among countries (Beuker et al., 2019). The most well-known example is likely Denmark's flexicurity policy. Those strategies combine active labor market policies aimed to activate workers toward being more flexible while also providing generous social welfare policies to support those in need.

Research is needed to explain the effects of distinct flexicurity policies on contingent workers' career experiences. In addition, we need theorizing on how flexicurity can be translated to the organizational level to understand the roles and responsibilities of organizations that hire contingent workers (Kornelakis, 2014; Zhang et al., 2015). In this vein, LMIs play a crucial role in supporting and securing work for contingent workers performing non-standard career paths (Lorquet et al., 2018). In short, these studies will be insightful on how (external) security systems can be designed on institutional and organizational levels to influence contingent workers' career sustainability (Semenza and Pichault, 2019). Flexicurity is a fitting concept to study the person, context and time interactions impacting contingent workers' career sustainability because it can be a contextual buffer to safeguard an individual's flexibility over time.

2.5 Conclusion

Contingent work is a prevailing characteristic of the labor market in the new world of work (Katz and Krueger, 2019). Although research into this phenomenon has been expanding rapidly, insights continue to be fragmented across different literature streams. In this article, we organized and synthesized the fragmented contingent work literature through a sustainable career lens. This perspective takes into account that contingent workers' career experiences result from a complex and dynamic interplay between personal and contextual factors over time. Based on our review and synthesis of the contingent work literature, we identified several areas for future research that offer the most potential for knowledge development. Specifically, we propose research should focus on person-career fit, career shocks, employability and flexicurity to help this research area move forward. We are convinced that further advancing our understanding of how these (f)actors shape the career experience of contingent workers is essential for creating sustainable careers for contingent workers. As such, we hope our critical review and research agenda will spur new research on contingent workers' careers and helps build interdisciplinary connections in this area.

Chapter 3

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

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.

Keywords: Temporary agency work, Agency temps, Career, Career self-management, Nonstandard work

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3.1 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: 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.

3.2 Theoretical background

3.2.1 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.

3.2.2 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., 2023a). 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).

3.2.3 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).

3.3 Method

3.3.1 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 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.

3.3.2 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.

3.3.3 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 re-occurrence of these themes. Consequently, we reached saturation after 27 interviews. See Table 3.1 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 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.

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.

3.3.4 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, Figure 3.1 shows that the categories emerging from our analysis were represented in at least half (typical), but not all of the participants (general).

Table 3.1 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 2009-2016)	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 2x 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
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).

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

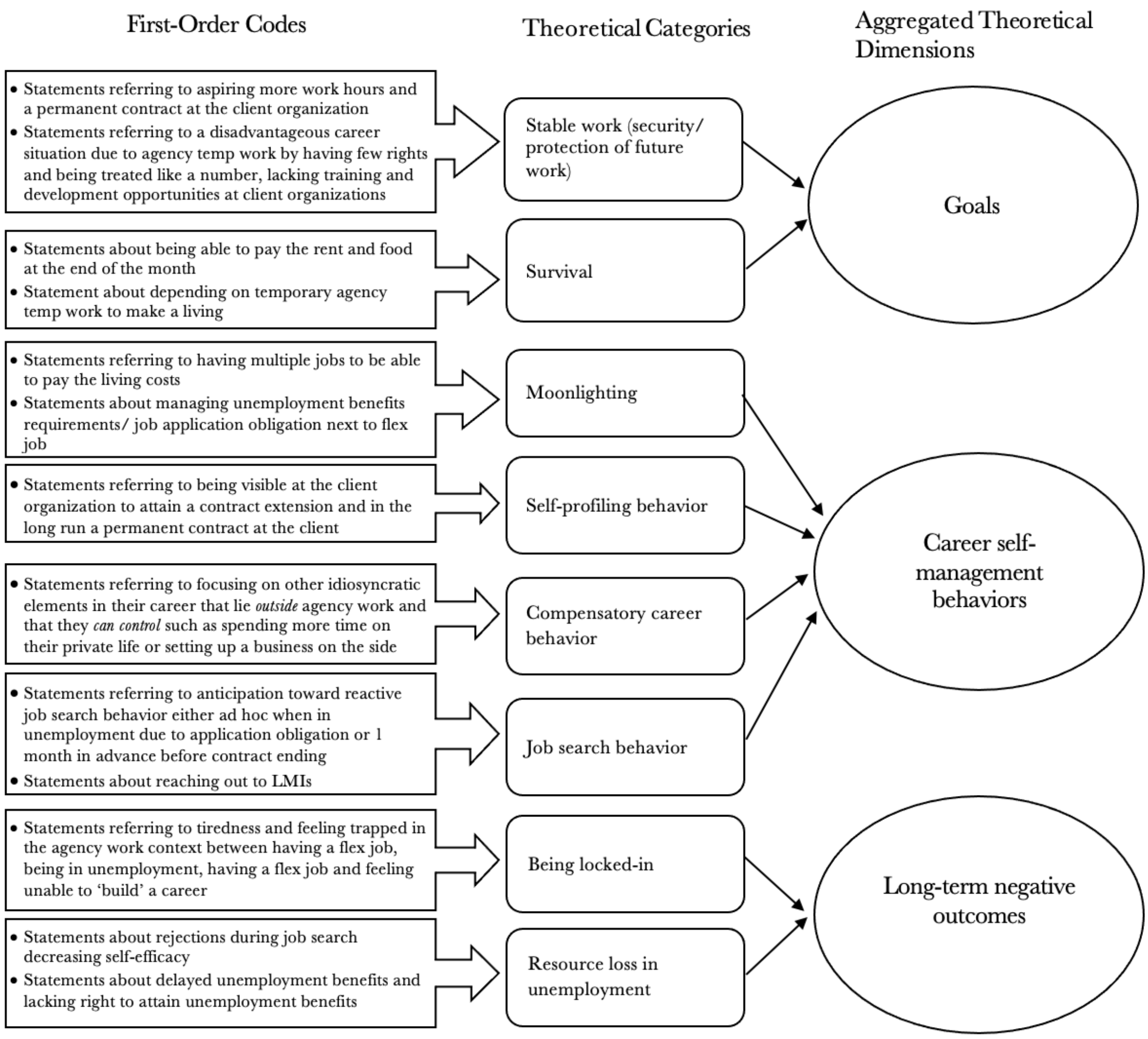

Figure 3.1 Overview of data structure for career self-management among agency temps.

Note: All categories are typical as defined by Hill et al. (2005).

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. 3.1 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 Figure 3.1.

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.

3.4 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.

3.4.1 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.

3.4.2 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)

3.4.3 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.

3.5 Discussion

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

3.5.1 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 3.2.

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-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

Table 3.2 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

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).

3.5.2 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.

3.5.3 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).

3.6 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.

Chapter 4

When people bite the hand that feeds them: An ethnographic study of triadic social exchanges in the gig economy

Abstract

This paper provides an understanding of the role of social exchanges in work in the gig economy. Drawing on an ethnographic study consisting of 75 interviews, 80 hours of shadowing gig workers in food delivery (i.e., riders and restaurant staff), and over 300 social media posts, we discovered that gig workers are treated poorly by the platform. This poor treatment is the initiating action for three unique social exchange mechanisms: Self-oriented reciprocity (reaction toward platform), de-socializing social exchanges (triadic reciprocity), and repairing social exchanges (triadic inverted reciprocity). Depending on the mechanism, low or high-quality social exchanges developed, and externalities emerged or were internalized. That is, via self-oriented reciprocity and de-socializing the social exchanges low-quality social exchanges can develop between parties leading to an exchange breakdown and externalities (e.g., cold food for the customer). Via repairing social exchanges high-quality social exchanges can develop between gig workers leading to the internalization of externalities before they pop up (e.g., delivering food with care). Finally, we outline opportunities for further research on social exchange theory in the new world of work and research on the gig economy.

Keywords: Gig work, gig economy, social exchanges, social exchange theory, algorithmic management, platform work

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4.1 Introduction

"…at a moment when the reality doesn't match the algorithm, the system collapses."
(fieldwork day 2 – gig worker)

The new era of workplaces has arrived. Work is increasingly platform-mediated, whereby an algorithm organizes work. Yet, platforms wrongfully give the impression that all the work performed is automated. Various kinds of human labor are intentionally hidden. First, the platform-mediated work does involve human work, referred to as 'ghost work'. For example, Uber's real-time ID check seems AI-driven but is actually performed by human ghost workers (Gray & Suri, 2019). Second, as the gig worker in the opening quote indicates, gig workers often need to navigate work where the algorithm ends. The platform assumes to fully organize work, but the "app is an 'imperfect' system because it can never fully control [work]" (Chan & Humphreys, 2018, p. 33). Because this labor is hidden, researchers have a poor understanding of the work that is happening in the new era of work that we need to come to terms with.

This tendency for a platform to assume full control and hide the human labor involved coincides with the *permissive* side of gig work as discussed in the "permissive potentates" framing (Vallas & Schor, 2020). The platform is considered permissive because it narrowly defines its 'governing' task as matching supply and demand while leaving aspects regarding the work process and coordination vague. By contrast, the literature focuses heavily on the potentate side. The platform is potent as it centralizes and exercises its power by fragmenting work and then taking a cut of the profits for being a middleman. The platform is so powerful that it shapes employment relations (Duggan et al., 2020; Kellogg et al., 2020). More specifically, the platform designs power asymmetries into work (Curchod et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2021) and uses that power to monitor and control workers (Newlands, 2021).

To illustrate, information asymmetries (e.g., between consumer and gig worker (Shapiro, 2020)) are deliberately created by the platform pressuring gig workers to have good ratings (Kellog et al., 2020; Heiland, 2021) and organize their work accordingly. Hence, under the guise of an efficient potentate that exercises its power, the platform, thus, forces workers to organize themselves, allowing itself to minimize its costs and efforts in organizing work.

Although the potentate side of platform work has received abundant research attention, we know little about the human work involved in the gig economy when the platform is permissive. What we do know is that social exchanges need to be navigated without predefined scripts or common understanding. As social exchanges are at the core of how people interact when working (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), we focus in this research on how gig workers navigate exchanges using social behaviors.

Social exchange theory is one of the most influential theories for explaining human behavior regarding navigating social exchanges (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Social exchange theory describes humans' engagement in transactions with exchange partners based on the principle of reciprocity (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Social relationships at work are not only crucial for understanding work and career experiences but also for the work process itself such as finishing tasks and coordinating work across different roles (Heaphy et al., 2018). Yet, in the gig economy, such social relationships are taken apart by an algorithm because the platform is mediating the work. It is poorly understood how social exchanges develop in the context of platform-mediated work.

Although social exchange theory can help us come to a better understanding of social exchanges in platform-mediated work, a key theoretical concern is that "behavioral predictions offered by social exchange theory have become too general and imprecise" (Cropanzano et al., 2017, p. 3). We claim that the characteristics of platforms are particularly relevant to invite scholars to rethink such predictions. First, the employment relation is not closed (i.e., procedurally screened hires in a hierarchical, bureaucratic, organization). By contrast, the gig economy is characterized by open employment relationships with undefined scripts, and personnel selection criteria reduced to getting a random stranger with some 'stars on the app'. This open employment relationship is likely to reconfigure exchanges and work (Vallas & Schor, 2020). Second, the platform fragments work and delegates the segments to multiple parties such that related social exchanges go beyond dyads. Indeed, Duggan et al. (2020) highlight that "the fragmented nature of app-work, through its reliance on technology via digital platforms and governing algorithms, may erode the reciprocity found in traditional employment relationships" (p. 121).

To address the key problem in the gig work literature of navigating social exchanges when the 'organization' is a permissive potentate, we ask the following research question: *How do social exchanges unfold in the context of platform-mediated work?* To address this question, we explore interactions in the gig economy on the platforms Uber Eats and Deliveroo through 75 interviews and 80 hours of shadowing.

This study contributes to social exchange theory and gig work. First, we add to social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Cropanzano et al., 2017) by investigating social exchange in triads and theorizing new mechanisms. Second, we add to gig work literature (cf. Ashford et al., 2018; Duggan et al., 2020; Vallas & Schor, 2020) by showing how the platforms' mediation of work disrupts the social fabric of work and by foregrounding previously underappreciated hidden ghost work.

4.2 Theoretical background

4.2.1 Theorizing the context: Platform-mediated work

The platform-mediated work context is characterized by two distinguishing features: (1) open employment relations, and (2) tasks fragmented among multiple parties. Platforms are a new form of work organization referred to as "permissive potentates" (Vallas & Schor, 2020). Contrary to the traditional economic governance structures known as the organization mode (hierarchy structure) and market mode (free market structure) (Williamson, 2008), platforms adopt both modes simultaneously (Meijerink et al., 2021; Möhlmann et al., 2021). Governance is characterized by "control (that) is radically distributed, while power remains centralized" (Kornberger et al., 2017, p. 79). On the one hand, to keep the power centralized, platforms perform the organization mode via algorithmic management. Self-learning algorithms are in control of decisions priorly performed by supervisors (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2021) such as revenue optimization, matches, and task distribution (Vallas & Schor, 2020). On the other hand, they simultaneously perform market mode governance to cut costs leaving a market space for autonomous actors (Prassl, 2018).

Concretely, this means that platforms comprise employment relationships that are almost as open as free markets (e.g., Morales & Stecher, 2023). Vallas and Schor (2020) define closed employment relationships as consisting of a "selection of employees, detailed control over work methods and schedules, and management's own evaluation of worker performance" (p. 283). A closed relationship means workers operate in a bureaucratic hierarchical setting with a 'boss' and a worker and/ or a team having a shared understanding on the organizational goals, values, and work roles. By contrast, open relationships are relaxing the selection criteria of employees and lack "routinization, scripting, or the direct imposition of formal rules" (p. 283). Due to the openness that the platform leaves, gig workers need to coordinate work without any predefined scripts or common understanding (Vallas & Schor, 2020).

This openness has far-reaching implications that go beyond the employment relation; the platform also opens up the 'gig' to multiple parties that have to work together but are not jointly employed into one organization. To perform gig work, multiple parties (e.g., the gig worker, the producer, and the client) have to be connected via the platform continuously (Cropanzano et al. 2023). Notably, the economic exchange is between the gig worker and the platform (Stanford, 2017), where the platform pays the gig workers for the performed gig via commission fees gathered from producers and clients. The actual work is performed between the other parties.

This new governance model is challenging decades of research in organizational behavior and management related to traditional bureaucratic settings (hierarchy). Scholars warned that management theories may lose their usefulness in explaining the world of work because of not being representative anymore of the rapidly changing work context (Johns, 2006, 2017). Building on this, we examine social exchanges in platform mediated work. We use this new and poorly understood context to challenge the workings of a well-established theory: social exchange theory.

4.2.2 Social exchange theory

At its core, social exchange theory (SET) highlights the trading of resources: love, status, information, money, goods, and services (Foa & Foa, 1975; 1980). These can be divided into economic resources, such as salary or bonuses, and socio-emotional exchanges, for instance trust and commitment (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Foa & Foa, 1975). In contrast to economic exchange obligations that are predetermined in a contract, social exchanges are often unspecified obligations that operate on the expectation of future returns

(Blau, 1986; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). To illustrate, employers may offer developmental opportunities and get employees' promises of loyalty in return. Social exchange theory describes humans' engagement in such transactions with exchange partners based on the principles of reciprocity (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Reciprocity describes the give and take in response to an action, benefit, or harm. If these exchanges are balanced and equal, they can lead to high-quality social exchanges (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Cropanzano et al., 2017). This process often fosters a sense of mutual understanding and fairness in social interactions (Gouldner, 1960; Homans, 1974).

Scholars have emphasized the importance of shifting social exchange theorizing from the content perspective (i.e., focus on which resources are exchanged) to a process perspective to better understand the dynamics of employment relationships (Shore et al., 2009). The process perspective acknowledges that the experience of the employment relationship is more complex than simply narrowing it down to the actual resources exchanged. Instead, it focuses on the interactions of exchanges that are happening in an ongoing process to also understand workers' attitudes, behaviors and lived experiences.

4.2.3 Challenging assumptions of social exchanges in the gig economy

We highlight two underlying assumptions in social exchange research that are challenged when considering the core features of platform-mediated work. First, SET has primarily focused on exchanges in dyads, such as employee-employer or supervisor-subordinate. In these dyadic relations, the social exchange process is characterized by a clear actor and target of an exchange. Therefore, enacting reciprocity between these dyads is a relatively straightforward process. That is, the actor performs the initiating behavior, and the target responds toward the actor with a reciprocating behavior. Thereby, the actor treats the target person in a good or bad way, which determines the further development and quality of the relationship between these two exchange partners (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Good treatments that have been examined are, for instance, justice, trust, organizational support, or extra-role behavior (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). Bad treatments that have been examined are, for instance, mobbing, aggression, emotional abuse, or retaliation (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Ferris et al., 2016). In general, targets respond to positive initiating behaviors with positive reciprocating replies and to negative initiating behaviors with negative reciprocating replies (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

However, contrary to dyadic and closed relationships, it takes more than two parties to perform the gig work because the platform only connects the parties for a specific service. Beyond that, those parties – such as food riders and restaurants – have to establish some kind of social exchange together as well. Thus, the question arises how social exchanges evolve when the work encompasses more than two parties, especially when the app makes it appear as if each gig worker only has to worry about their exchange with the platform, and the app provides an incomplete script for exchanges between gig workers.

Second, research generally assumes shared norms, which facilitate reciprocity. For example, it is assumed that both parties find a high-quality relationship the ideal outcome. This assumption fits with investigating social exchanges in closed relationships such as employee-organization (Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007) or supervisor-subordinate (Bernerth et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2021) within the traditional organizational bureaucratic setting. Thereby, due to the future reciprocity and multiple interactions building upon each other, over time, relationships can develop via an upward spiral toward high-quality relationships characterized by trust, commitment, and support.

Yet, new forms of organizing work, such as platform-mediated work, question social exchange theory by transforming from closed to open employment relationships. Such openness may prevent the development of shared norms that were assumed by previous research on social exchange theory. What are outcomes in this new type of employment? Are they 'doomed' to poor outcomes due to the missing detailed performance control and clearly defined work methods that are typical for closed relationships? Or might there be social exchange theory related mechanisms such as reciprocity in, so far unexplored, open employment that still allow for positive outcomes? These questions cannot be answered by only relying on the current theorizing on social exchange theory. These unanswered questions show that the current social exchange understanding risks not adequately mirroring the social exchange experiences of all workers in the current labor market (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018). Overall, the multiple parties in the gig economy and the more open employment relationship make it imperative to generate knowledge on exchanges with limited theoretical priors and advance our theoretical understanding of social exchange dynamics.

4.3 Method

We explored work experiences in the gig economy. We specifically chose the food rider sector because of its multiple interactions of different human actors involved in the work process and tied to the platform; riders and restaurants. We selected gig workers working on Uber Eats and Deliveroo. Both platforms promote the same working conditions by 'hiring' riders on a freelance basis. Also, their apps are designed similarly, making it possible to do research on both platforms together. We decided to conduct this study in Europe because European institutions are trying to get a grip on online labor platforms aiming to regulate the legal context of this market more (European Commission, 2021).

4.3.1 Data sources

We draw on three overlapping data sources that we triangulated to strengthen validity (Jick, 1979; Maxwell, 1992): 75 semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders, 10 days of fieldwork resulting in 80 hours of shadowing, and social media data of delivery rider groups in the Netherlands resulting in over 300 posts. To determine the sample size, we used the comparative method for theme saturation (Constantinou et al., 2017). We monitored the emerging themes of each interview and compared them with themes popping up in the other interviews. After 50 interviews, we identified the most relevant themes and then checked the other 25 interviews (#51-75) for their repetition to ensure we did not miss any other relevant themes. To prevent any bias, we re-ordered the 75 interviews and did another theme check across all 75 interviews. In addition, we double checked the identified themes with the emerging themes in our supplementary shadowing and social media data. In sum, saturation was reached after 75 interviews and 1 year of regularly shadowing food riders and monitoring social media posts.

Our final sample included 75 active participants which consisted of 9 restaurant staff (RS) and 66 riders (RI). After riders indicated that their work experience was actively shaped by their interactions with the restaurants, we decided to interview actors from the restaurant side. Customers were passive study participants observed during shadowing. The active participants had 29 different nationalities and their age ranged from 17 to 59 years old (mean 25) and 68 were male and 7 female. The riders had differing amounts of experience on the platforms. See Table 4.1 for an overview table of the active participants' demographics.

Semi-structured interviews. Our main source of primary data are 75 semi-structured interviews lasting on average 75 minutes each, resulting in 94 hours of interview data in total. The interviews were recorded with verbal permission, and participants signed an informed consent document. The interviews were conducted online on Zoom, or offline in a café, following the participants' preferences. When participants were Dutch, the interview was conducted in Dutch and otherwise in English. The interview included questions on: overall work and career experiences on the platform, their work self and their social community, and specifically on their interactions with the other parties.

We designed a semi-structured interview guide, which we revised throughout the data collection process when new elements emerged that were deemed relevant to our investigation (Spradley, 2016). For instance, at first, we asked respondents about their relationship and interaction with the platform. We then noticed that some identified more with the algorithm than the abstract entity 'the platform', therefore, we directly integrated a question about the algorithm. In general, at the beginning, we asked broader questions moving towards more narrow areas of inquiry—based on the data analysis that happened simultaneously (Spradley, 2016) –when the interview progressed. For instance, the poor platform support and issues (e.g., delays, damaged food) actors encountered emerged as a crucial theme early on, driving us to specify questions accordingly.

Shadowing. The data were supplemented with data from shadowing to get greater insights into how people interacted with the platform and the other actors involved. The first author performed 10 days of shadowing gig workers, resulting in 80 hours and 436 pages of vignette. Shadowing encompasses that the researcher follows the target individuals wherever they were going (McDonald, 2005), which enabled us to get an in-depth understanding on the behaviors in the gig economy by observing them in real-time. The first author invested heavily in building ties with gig workers to get access to shadowing. Shadowing enables researchers to generate insights regarding conspicuous invisibilities (Czarniawska, 2007). In particular, we shadowed two roles of the service transaction via the platform: the rider role and the restaurant manager role, both of which are necessary to perform the gig work on the platform. We shadowed gig workers for whole working days and for specific shifts such as

Table 4.1 Respondent demographics

#	Role	City	Platform(s)	Experience (# trips)	Age	Language	Nationality	Student
1	Rider	Nijmegen	Both	15287	37	NL	Dutch	No
2	Rider representative					NL	Dutch	No
3	Rider	Eindhoven	Both	795	25	EN	Indian	No
4	Restaurant manager	Hilversum				NL	Dutch	No
5	Restaurant manager	Hilversum				NL	Dutch	No
6	Journalist	Amsterdam				NL	Dutch	No
7	Rider representative	Amsterdam	Deliveroo	2000	28	NL	Dutch	No
8	Rider	Haarlem	Both	D:2611, U:267	35	NL	Dutch	No
9	Rider	Den Haag	Uber Eats	400	35	NL	Dutch	No
10	Rider	Rotterdam	Uber Eats	861	22	EN	Latvia	No
11	Rider	Utrecht	Uber Eats	1534	24	NL	Dutch	No
12	Rider	Amsterdam	Both	U:2071	37	EN	Romanian	No
13	Rider	Utrecht	Uber Eats	28	40	NL	Dutch	No
14	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	1500	27	EN	Pakistani	No
15	Restaurant employee	Rotterdam	-			NL	Dutch	Yes
16	Rider	Schiedam	Uber Eats	1250	22	NL	Dutch	Yes
17	Rider	Rotterdam	Uber Eats	1021	21	EN	Uganda	Yes
18	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	2548	21	EN	Hungarian	Yes
19	Rider	Nijmegen	Deliveroo, Uber Eats	1150		NL	Dutch	Yes
20	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	2475	21	NL	Dutch	Yes
21	Rider	The Hague	Uber Eats	204	21	EN	Ethiopian	Yes
22	Rider	Rotterdam	Deliveroo	12	23	EN	Bangladeshi	Yes
23	Rider	Rotterdam	Uber Eats	2500	28	EN	Rwandese	No
24	Rider	Rotterdam	Uber Eats	236	23	NL	Dutch	Yes
25	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	62	20	EN	Hungarian	Yes
26	Rider	Rotterdam	Deliveroo	1000	31	NL	Dutch	No

27	Rider	Den Haag	Deliveroo	12000	24	NL	Dutch	No
28	Rider	Utrecht	Deliveroo	135	30	NL	Dutch	No
29	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	488	24	EN	German	Yes
30	Rider	Rotterdam	Deliveroo	205	18	NL	Dutch	Yes
31	Restaurant manager	Alkmaar	Uber Eats		38	NL	Dutch	No
32	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	334	26	EN	British	No
33	Rider	Amsterdam	Deliveroo	45	17	NL	American	Yes
34	Rider	Den Haag	Uber Eats	1200	29	EN	Uruguayan	Yes
35	Rider	Rotterdam	Uber Eats	270	27	NL	Dutch	No
36	Rider	Leiden	Both	4200	26	NL	Dutch	No
37	Rider	Utrecht	Uber Eats	1212	27	EN	Indian	No
38	Rider	Rotterdam	Uber Eats	81	19	NL	Dutch	Yes
39	Rider	Delft	Both	4700	28	EN	Iranian	No
40	Rider	Amsterdam	Both	U:3586 D:495	41	EN	Ecuadorian	No
41	Rider	Rotterdam	Uber Eats	346	21	NL	Dutch	Yes
42	Restaurant manager	Amsterdam	Both	30% of revenue	31	NL	Dutch	No
43	Rider	Den Haag	Uber Eats	165	22	NL	Dutch	Yes
44	Rider	Utrecht	Both	D:3500, U:1050	28	EN	Iranian	No
45	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	11442	28	EN	Pakistani	Yes
46	Rider representative	Delft	Deliveroo			EN	Dutch	No
47	Rider	Amsterdam	Deliveroo, Uber Eats in the past	14400	35	EN	Columbian	No
48	Restaurant manager	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	20 to 60% of revenue	44	NL	Venezuelan	No
49	Restaurant manager	Amsterdam	Both	10% of revenue	31	EN	Croatian	No
50	Restaurant manager	Amsterdam	Both		40	NL	Dutch	No
51	Restaurant manager	Amsterdam			29	NL	Dutch	No
52	Restaurant manager	Amsterdam	Both		50	NL	Dutch	No
53	Rider	Delft	Uber Eats	635	28	EN	Nepali	No
54	Rider	Delft	Uber Eats	4000		EN	South African	No

55	Rider	Delft	Both	D:4000, U:1000	32	EN	Zimbabwean	No
56	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	1418	22	EN	Indonesian	No
57	Rider	Rotterdam	Both	N/A	22	EN	Romanian	No
58	Rider	Delft	Uber Eats	300	22	EN	Zambian	No
59	Rider	Utrecht	Uber Eats	1770	23	EN	Indian	No
60	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	N/A	26	EN	Saudi	No
61	Rider	Delft	Uber Eats	800	28	EN	Iranian	No
62	Rider	Rotterdam	Uber Eats	250	26	EN	Brazilian	No
63	Rider	Delft	Uber Eats	1200	26	EN	Sudanese	No
64	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	300	28	EN	Spanish	No
65	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	2400	33	EN	Albanian	No
66	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	380	31	EN	Filipino	No
67	Rider	Amsterdam	Both	1070	25	NL	Dutch	No
68	Rider	Amsterdam	Deliveroo	5000	59	NL	Dutch	No
69	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	110	31	EN	Iranian	No
70	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	900	21	EN	Bangladeshi	No
71	Rider	Amsterdam	Both	1800	30	EN	Brazilian	No
72	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	4000	41	EN	Indian	No
73	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	1833	23	NL	Dutch	No
74	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	4000	36	EN	Pakistani	No
75	Rider	Amsterdam	Uber Eats	1500	42	NL	Dutch	No

dinner or lunch shifts, resulting in shadowing work ranging from 2.5 hours to 14.5 hours per day. In general, the fist author performed shadowing once a month for one year. This was a deliberate choice to not get 'carried away' in the field and safeguard the researcher identity while at the same time ensuring to stay up to date regarding happenings in the field. We primarily used this data to get a richer context for understanding the work itself and how participants were interacting with the platform and the other actors.

Social media data. The data were also supplemented with data from over 300 social media posts specific to the food delivery rider community in the Netherlands. Riders used these groups to share their delivery experiences, raise problems they encountered, and ask for help in job-related matters. We used the social media data to gain a richer context for understanding gig workers' work experiences, use it as background info to triangulate with the statements of the participants, and to get a sense of the scale of the issues. For instance, participants shared on social media their frustrations with the platform not taking responsibility. This was a reoccurring theme that we also identified in the interview and shadowing data. Finally, as a secondary data source, we checked if other topics were discussed that we did not ask people. That is, we kept an eye on the ongoing conversations there. When we saw topics popping up that seemed relevant to our focal study topic, we also integrated questions regarding it in the interviews. For example, we noticed posts regarding renting accounts needed to perform gig work against a commission and therefore asked participants about it.

4.3.2 Procedure

Before we launched this study, we received approval for the research proposal and research tools from the university's ethics review board. We recruited participants through a multi-tiered recruitment strategy, thereby, ensuring a diverse sample. We relied on street intercepts (McCormack et al., 2013), online recruitment, and snowball sampling (Sadler et al., 2010) by asking during the closing of each interview to suggest other potential candidates. Regarding the street intercept technique, we got in contact with gig workers 'on the street' while they were waiting for an order in front of a restaurant, hanging out at public places with other riders waiting for orders to come in, and walking into restaurants on not busy times. Thereby, we ensured not to constrain the work and gig workers' work duties while they were logged in. After a quick 'hi', we pitched the research project in about 20 seconds. If the person was still interested after the short pitch, we exchanged contact details. Thereafter, we followed up with the potential candidates by sending them the detailed information letter. If the person was still interested after receiving this information, we scheduled an interview at a non-working time. Through this approach and by not paying participants for participation, we ensured that people decided to participate based on their own free will and expressed their experiences freely (Head, 2009). In light of the online recruitment technique, we searched on social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn for gig workers. To get access to pools of rider contact details, we entered several social media Deliveroo and Uber Eats groups on social media. We posted messages in these groups and in addition sent private messages to gig workers.

The first author and three research assistants conducted the interviews. The first author continuously interviewed gig workers from March 2021 until February 2022 to not lose touch with the field. Several steps were taken to guarantee optimal data collection. Before the research assistants started interviewing, they were trained to develop sophisticated interviewing skills and understand the interview guide. Thereby, the first author ensured that the interviewing style across interviewees was consistent. Next to the training that the research assistants participated in before interviewing, the first author coached the research assistants.

Specifically, the first author listened to the recordings while commenting in the transcripts and based on these insights held coaching sessions with the assistants.

4.3.3 Data analysis

We used a grounded theory approach and followed the guidelines of interpretative research by Charmaz (2014). Our analysis emerged as an iterative process, continuously making sense of the data via comparisons (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We established a routine of writing free-flowing, analytical memoranda about emerging theory. The memoranda guided our data analysis stages by highlighting areas that needed further analysis (Strauss, 1987). Thereby, the first author engaged in coding on an ongoing basis. At varying frequency, the other authors of the research team had a role as reflective outsiders or devil's advocate to challenge the thinking and refine codes (Gioia et al., 2013).

Open coding. The open codes were induced by coding interview data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which was done after every transcribed interview. From the beginning, our data collection and data analysis happened simultaneously. We compared developed codes with the entire data set we had gathered and, if needed, revised the codes. The open codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) enabled her to identify key elements that were important for our informants. Such key elements were, for instance, imperfect algorithmic management, difficulty in reaching the platform when problems occur, and specific work behaviors.

Axial coding. In the second stage of our analysis, we explored a deeper structure among the open codes. We moved in circles from data to puzzling preliminary insights (i.e., hunches). We used constant comparison method again but this time to compare our open codes with each other to develop more abstract axial codes. No relations or causalities were theorized at this point. The main hunch was that we were seeing different behaviors toward the platform and toward other gig workers. Ultimately, we derived several axial codes such as:

Outsmarting the system, multi-apping, minimizing responsibility, dehumanizing, humanizing (see Figure 1 for a complete overview).

Theoretical coding. During the third stage of analysis, we compared the axial codes and considered broader and even more abstract codes to understand the relations between the concepts. After developing the second-order codes through inductive reasoning without prior literature, our focus shifted to engaging with existing scholarly work. This marked the juncture where our approach transitioned from inductive to abductive reasoning (Charmaz, 2014). Abductive reasoning researchers employ when confronted with puzzling findings, trying to find the best possible post-hoc explanation of a phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014). Our approach aligns with Charmaz's perspective that grounded theory can encompass abductive reasoning, a viewpoint also corroborated by other scholars like Gioia et al. (2013) and Locke et al. (2008). Consequently, at this phase, we turned to the existing literature, aiming to identify a theory capable of elucidating our hunch that the work gig workers were performing was more complex than simply delivering or preparing food. Instead, it also encompassed navigating the negative instances and the interactions with other actors. While some behaviors actors adopted mirrored the bad treatment the platform enacted toward actors, other behaviors were counteracting the bad treatment of the platform. As we started to become interested in explaining the different behaviors and different interaction qualities (e.g., some were more social than others), social exchange theory came to guide and bound our analysis, subsequently informing our extension of the theory. We chose this theory as it helped us to thoroughly disentangle the dynamics of the different behaviors' actors enacted toward others.

To enhance transparency, we provide our coding in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 Overview of Data Structure based on interviews and shadowing – Social exchanges in the gig economy

4.3 Findings

Gig workers (i.e., riders and restaurant staff) reported to us 1) they are treated poorly by the platform. This poor treatment is the initiating action for three unique social exchange mechanisms: 2) Self-oriented reciprocity (reaction toward platform), 3) De-socializing social exchanges (triadic reciprocity), and 4) Repairing social exchanges (triadic inverted reciprocity). Depending on the mechanism, low or high-quality social exchanges developed and externalities emerged or were internalized. We characterize externalities as effects of the social exchanges on parties outside of the direct exchange relationship. That is, via self-oriented or triadic reciprocity low-quality social exchanges can develop between parties leading to an exchange breakdown and externalities (e.g., cold food for the customer). Via inverted reciprocity high-quality social exchanges can develop between gig workers leading to the internalization of externalities before they pop up (e.g., delivering food with care).

4.3.1 Poor treatment of gig workers (initiating action)

In the exchange with the platform, gig workers experienced the platform managed the process poorly.

Self-oriented algorithm and selective exchange execution. The platform used the algorithm to engage in the exchanges on its behalf. Gig workers highlighted that they felt the algorithm met some expectations of their exchange with the platform while falling short in others.

The algorithm was the 'boss' for riders and consequently represented their exchange partner *the platform.* One rider noted "No, that's really only through the app. The app is your boss. And other than that, you have no human contact" (I43, RI). The algorithm decides if a rider gets an order, how much the rider will earn with the order and in the most extreme case can also block an account (I47, RI). But the exact formula behind the algorithm is a "secret" (I18, RI) for riders. Thereby, riders experienced the platform as a laissez-faire exchange partner. One rider explained: "There's what? An AI - you don't have a boss. So you don't really have employees in that sense (I18, RI). The quote suggests that the rider does not even see the algorithm as a boss, as he calls it. Yet, the key essence in the quote is that the algorithm is not a boss in a traditional sense who tells employees directly what to do. Instead, the algorithm is a more tacit boss representing the platform. Across interviews, participants explained to us how they make their working decisions regarding when to go online and for how long, depending on what the app showed them. For example, in the app, 'boosts' popped up. These boosts included earning more in specific hours or getting paid a bonus if they delivered a certain number of deliveries in a specific time window. The rider explained that the algorithm can even send wrong signals to riders:

> "One of the reasons Friday night is so quiet for a rider is because there's so many riders on the street. Because that's when there's a promotion and you get paid 35% more per order. So you get paid 35% more. And then really a lot of riders come riding up the street and then you actually have nothing to do again." (I8, RI)

As the quote shows, these 'boosts', which are signals from the algorithm to go online at specific times, can be even disadvantageous for riders. That is, if too many riders were out who want to catch the extra earnings, the situation appeared that there were too few orders/gigs for all the riders who were online. In this sense, the algorithm does not care about the riders' interests of making decent money on the platform. Instead, the algorithm promotes only the platform's own interest to ensure that enough riders are online to handle the orders on the platform at busy times and days.

Restaurants paid the platform 30-35% of the meal price. Due to this formal exchange relationship between restaurants and the platform, the restaurant staff expected reciprocity in this relationship. Specifically, they expected that the exchange partner (i.e., the platform) runs the online order and delivery service smoothly because they pay for this service. Yet, restaurant staff described that the service was poor. Specifically, restaurant managers noted that the platforms technological system was still in its infancy (I31, RS) and was not 'waterproof' (I50, RS). Restaurant managers reported the app crashed frequently and then they were offline and could not make money. One restaurant manager reported:

> "Because the platforms are under pressure because of lot of restaurants, I understand that, you know, systems can crash. But system crashing three times a day and it was just too much. I mean, everybody has a limit. But they wanted more money, more money, more money and more money. And then once you have system crashing, blocking whole blocks of people not able to make the money now. It's ridiculous." (I49, RS)

This shows the poor exchange quality experienced by the restaurant staff from the platform.

Lacking platform support. Gig workers experienced lacking support from the platform when needed. The platform provided a rider support (also referred to by riders as customer support/service). Riders made use of the rider support to clarify and solve issues with their exchange partner (i.e., the platform). However, all participants described the low quality of these provided 'actions' or even the absence of any actions by the platform. Riders noted negative characteristics such as "they don't really reply in time… all the late communications, finding the information yourself, all these things" (I17, RI). Due to the bad reachability and often standardized answers (I20, RI; I21, RI), another rider noted in 90% of the cases issues are not solved with the platform during work (I10, RI). The lack of preciseness of answers and bad reachability of the platform support further demonstrates that the platform performs poorly as an exchange partner.

The restaurant staff mentioned that platform support (also referred to as 'customer support') was bad and hard to reach when they needed it. One restaurant manager said:

> "But this is algorithm support. So you listen to her. 'Do you have a problem with an order - press 1', do you have a problem with the delivery boy - press 2'. I don't know what, you cannot reach Uber. It is the biggest b*llsh*t ever." (I49, RS)

Due to the laissez faire service, restaurant staff often did not solve the problems via the platform anymore as it was too time consuming and annoying. “If not, you have to call them again, start the whole story over again. So, you're not going to do that either. Then, you think my loss, I take it. I'll accept the loss.” (I50, RS). Similarly, another restaurant manager highlighted the platform is organizing the communication flow in such a way that if any problems occur for the customer, the customer often gets in contact with the restaurant instead of with the platform:

> “But actually, of course, they order from Deliveroo. And the order gets forwarded to us. But in the end, if they have problems or something, they sometimes call the restaurant. Like, I ordered something wrong and can you fix that? No, of course we can't fix that. We have to arrange it with Deliveroo. But the customer doesn't always understand that. Deliveroo does everything in its power to forward these kinds of reports to us. Because they don't want to be called. They're really just a platform, and as long as you do everything right in their system, then everything is also correct. But if you make a mistake, well, that costs them time because someone has to pick up the phone again. So, they [platform], do not want that [means to fix things].” (I42, RS)

Overall, gig workers experienced the platform provided poor treatment. In the following, we discuss the three social exchange mechanisms initiated by that poor treatment.

4.3.2 Self-oriented reciprocity (reaction toward platform)

In the relation between the gig worker and the platform, we discovered several behaviors by which gig workers reciprocated their poor treatment toward the platform. We see those behaviors as motivated by a drive to reclaim agency in a tit-for-tat way that reciprocates the self-oriented treatment by platforms.

Outsmarting the system. Riders engaged in outsmarting the system as a response to the poor treatment by the platform. Due to reciprocity, poor treatment from the platform toward the rider triggered other (follow-up) bad actions from the riders toward the platform (I37, RI). One rider described it like this:

> "Big time, big time. It's like he's my Mafia leader. You've got to take him down. It's big time because especially if they p*ss me off with some kind of customer service, then the next day I'm definitely looking to do something to earn more money." (I3, RI)

Concrete examples of this reciprocating deviant behavior were stealing food (I25, RI; I47, RI), working illegally with fake IDs to not pay taxes (I42, RS), and adopting tricks by which riders optimized their earnings. These often illegal work behaviors encompassed 'hacking' the algorithm and thereby gaining benefits for themselves. For instance, during promotions in new cities, riders 'stayed online by being offline'. That is, the algorithm thought they were still busy delivering while they were actually just enjoying life (fieldwork day 2). Some revenge work behaviors, such as stealing food, caused externalities toward restaurants, customers, and follow-up riders. One restaurant manager explained:

> "The rider can steal the order. So, he comes here, he picks it up. And then, he doesn't press that button that he had picked it up. Half an hour later the customer calls us and asks: "Hey, where is the order? We are like… it has been picked up half an hour ago. - And then you know, he stole it. He didn't check the box in the app that he picked the order up. And then nobody knows again who has it, where the order is. Because in the meantime, if the rider did not tick the 'picked-up button' in the app, the app [the algorithm] assigns the same order to new riders all the time. So, then suddenly it becomes a thing [...]." (I50, RS).

Riders also engaged in directly canceling orders when they popped up in the app if they saw this order took them out of the 'hotspot' (I23, RI) zone where the likelihood of getting gigs is high. That is, riders noticed that the algorithm would sometimes send them into the middle of nowhere where, on the way back, they did not get an order in (I10, RI). Hence, they would have to cycle back unpaid and, therefore, decided to cancel the order immediately. Because riders experienced the platform as focusing on profit over their interest, riders reciprocated by not doing work for the platform if it was not profitable for them. This caused negative externalities. For example, a restaurant manager noted: "Then we have to suffer but also the customer, because they also have to wait longer." (I42, RS).

Multi-apping. Riders engaged in multi-apping; i.e., working on different platforms simultaneously. We identified this as an action toward the platform. That is, riders performed this behavior to respond to the unstable income provided by the platform. Riders engaged in this behavior when they became tired of not getting orders in through the platform they started originally working with (fieldwork day 9). Multi-apping helped riders to stabilize their earnings.

We identified two flavors of this behavior: whereas some riders went offline in the other app(s) when an order came in on a different platform (fieldwork day 3), others accepted several orders on different platforms in parallel (I47, RI). This latter behavior was particularly problematic for gig performance as the riders could not complete multiple gigs simultaneously, hence, leading to delays. This led to externalities, such as annoyance of customers and restaurant managers that food is delivered late and cold (I52, RS).

Minimizing responsibilities. Another reciprocating behavior was minimizing responsibilities by reducing 'the skin in the game'. When a problem occurred (e.g., an order was incomplete (I30, RI), the food was damaged (fieldwork day 7), or a customer's address was incomplete (I23, RI), gig workers often strictly performed only the minimum required task and clearly managed their boundaries. Gig workers did not see the problem as caused in their 'sphere'. Both riders and restaurant staff felt it would be up to the platform to manage the problem. One rider explained:

> "And I just say, if you have a problem, speak to Uber. I don't work for you. I'm working with Uber Eats. So, I think it's on some level, it's just setting boundaries and on some levels is you're not taking responsibility for what I'm not responsible for." (I44, RI)

Restaurant staff engaged in minimizing responsibility behavior by knowingly giving cold food to a rider (I50, RS) when the rider arrived 'late for the food but on time according to the algorithm'. Restaurants would then only manage the 'bomb' in case the customer complained. The restaurants experienced, like the riders, that the platform was not reachable in time (I49, RS). Therefore, minimizing responsibility behavior was a way to get rid of problems without being a "thief of your own wallet" (I52, RS) by redoing it at their own costs. One restaurant manager illustrated:

> "Yes, we always give it along in the hope that the customer won't complain. As soon as we get a complaint, we call Uber or Deliveroo and say 'listen, that customer called, complained but you were an hour late. So you have to make a note that you are going to pay them out as well as refund that customer'. Then you have to wait again until the invoices come and you check and see if they actually did this. If not, you have to call them again, start the whole story all over again. So you're not going to do that either. Then, you think 'my loss, I take it'." (I50, RS)

This behavior was directed at the platform. The gig workers experienced that platforms only took responsibility for problems in the form of refunding. This was experienced as the platform not solving the problem. Therefore, the gig workers felt it was legitimate to reciprocate by also not solving the problem. The minimizing responsibility behavior led to issues remaining unsolved and surviving as bugs in the system. As a result, there is a downward trend in exchange quality as gig workers essentially almost stopped engaging in the social exchanges that are necessary to perform the gigs.

Overall, self-oriented reciprocity was a mechanism toward low-quality social exchanges between the riders and the platform, and the restaurants and the platform. When gig workers felt they were treated poorly by the platform, they reciprocated this by (1) outsmarting the system, (2) multi-apping, and (3) minimizing responsibilities. These reciprocating behaviors toward the platform often led to externalities of which riders, restaurant staff, and customers felt the direct consequences instead of the platform (e.g., cold food). Hence, although these social exchanges unfolded within dyads (i.e., rider – platform and restaurant – platform), they impacted the social exchanges between all parties.

4.3.3 De-socializing the social exchanges (triadic reciprocity)

We also discovered that social exchanges operated based on a triadic reciprocity. That is, the initiating action of poor treatment in the gig worker-platform exchange led to an experience we call 'reifying the app', which led gig workers to enact a behavior we call 'dehumanizing' in the rider-restaurant staff exchange. This triadic social exchange is different from the platform mediating the rider-restaurant staff exchange because most of the rider-restaurant staff exchange, and all of the triadic reciprocity, occurred in the void of the algorithm where the platform was permissive.

Reifying the app. The information riders and restaurant staff got fed by the app was often different. Due to the non-transparency in the app, parties could hardly get in contact with each other and were not able to verify information. Consequently, they took for granted that the app's information was accurate and represented the real world well. We refer to this belief as reifying the app. However, the shared understanding that parties assumed was amongst them, was more fiction than reality. We see this belief from the disagreements that occur due to parties only seeing their side of the gig in the app. For instance, restaurant staff were often surprised why riders came before the food was prepared. One restaurant manager said:

> "We started with 30 [minutes], then we went to 26, then it became 16, and sometimes it shows 8. So I called again, I said guys, I've called 50 times already, this really can't go on. I can't have 8 minutes. This is too much.
> I: And they can't change anything yet?
> R: Then they said they were working with an algorithm. And then I said Jesus, then I told everyone at least add five minutes because we have to go to at least fifteen. Eight is impossible for us to achieve." (I50, RS)

The quote shows how riders arrived too early in restaurant staff's eyes because the restaurant calculates with the time agreed on with the platform when signing the contract. But instead, it is a self-learning algorithm that changes the preparation time when the restaurant is quicker and showing that information to riders. The platform did not communicate this change to the restaurant. Further, it took the restaurant staff much effort to figure this out.

For riders, it was even less transparent what restaurant preparation times were based on. All they knew is what the app told them which they took for granted. This created tensions when different parties interpreted their shared reality based on different information. This rider expresses a taken-for-granted expectation that restaurant staff should adhere to the version of the world that he receives on his app; one that does not include waiting time:

> "(…) Restaurants should also just know that I am not paid to wait. There you can get a heated discussion at a restaurant. Because they say waiting is part of it. You have to know that's part of it - that you have to wait for your order. And then, you can get a very long discussion with a restaurant." (I11, RI)

The system further reinforced the realness of the app's version of reality through the customer ratings. Both rider and restaurant were often annoyed that they were penalized by the customer for actions that they felt were the fault of the other party. For example, the restaurants got bad reviews from the customer when the food arrived cold or damaged, which was caused by late pick-up arrival of rider (I52, RS). Similarly, the rider got bad customer ratings if the food arrived damaged or cold although it was caused by the restaurant giving cold food or packaging badly (I29, RI; I21, RI). But the consumer cannot judge this as they also only saw a version of the reality through their app. (There is of course no option in the app to give a rating to the platform itself who mis-coordinated the parties.)

Crucially, one gig worker failing to meet the other gig worker's expectation became charged with emotion and intense because of the poor treatment by the platform (initiating action). Consider if the platform had treated gig workers well, and take a moment to overcome misunderstandings with the help of platform. Furthermore, the social exchange between rider and restaurant was the only place where gig workers could express their dissatisfaction because the platform was unreceptive to their complaints and stress. The self-oriented reciprocity was a way to reclaim agency within the dyadic exchange with the platform, but this was not enough. Thus, gig workers used this third exchange (rider – restaurant) to engage in additional agency reclaiming. To reclaim the agency they felt they did not have in the social exchange with the platform, they compensated in the exchange with other gig workers by being extra intense. This intensity shaped the behavior that resulted from reifying the app.

Dehumanizing. Because of reifying the app, parties saw each other only through how the app showed the other to them. Therefore, riders and restaurant staff also behaved toward each other as if they were talking to the app's representation of the other. The app represented the process as an assembly line with riders shown to restaurants as a conveyor belt and restaurant staff shown to riders as pick-and-place robots. In line with that, we saw dehumanizing in the behavior of gig workers towards each other. We define dehumanizing as a behavior which involves treating individuals in a way that denies their inherent humanity, dignity, or worth, often by reducing them to objects that should perform their work flawlessly and are not worth communicating with if things do not go flawlessly.

Riders enacted the dehumanizing toward restaurant staff by often not directly communicating with the restaurant at all. Instead, they would just hold their phone in the face of the restaurant staff to show the order number. Further, they adopted a pushy body language toward the restaurant staff (fieldwork day 7), for example, by showing a disregard for personal boundaries and ignoring nonverbal cues. This behavior illustrated the dismissed individuality, lacking empathy for the other actor, and objectification of the restaurant staff.

Riders also dehumanized restaurant staff by expecting them to have the food prepared when the app showed the food is ready for pick up. When the restaurant staff was over time, the rider expected robotic precision regarding expected preparation time and bullied them when they were going over time. The riders did so by checking in with the restaurant employees and asking several times for the minutes if the restaurant staff was, in the rider's eyes, running late with preparing the delivery.

> "I am sometimes when they say these minutes, I'm putting on the timer and just when the time passes, I ask them, where is the food? And I did that and the guy said, yeah, it should be done like in 1, 2 minutes or something. OK, I put in the timer 1-2 minutes. I ask again and he's like, man sorry I can't talk to you. (…) And I'm just saying, OK, man, like you said, 5 to 10 minutes, about like the second order would be ready in about 10 minutes. Now it's been like 25 maybe even more. What are you doing? And yeah, he just said like yeah but I can't predict that. And I'm just saying like and then why are you telling me some random numbers, you know, like what is going on? (…) I want to know, like the exact truth. Not some 5, 10 minutes." (I10, RI)

Another dehumanizing behavior riders adopted was that riders cancelled the order/ gig when they had already arrived at the restaurant. In particular, the rider cancelled in front of the restaurant to penalize the restaurant when the restaurant gave priority to their own personnel instead of taking care of the order (I12, RI) and when the restaurant took too long (I47, RI). Riders did not tell the restaurant that they cancelled the order. This led to externalities similar to the ones due to the dyadic reciprocity. One rider put it this way:

> "R:….And then, sometimes you see it happening that someone just goes and cancels it when it's ready. So, then the restaurant has it ready and then he [rider] says, yes, I just canceled it, you're too late. And then you just get really irritated.
> I: Because then a new delivery guy does have to come...
> R: Then the order gets all cold. The owner can throw away his order. But that's the kind of thing you get. And then you just notice that there is irritation. And then, you know, this is just throwing oil on the fire. And then it's just one person being irritated by another and so it goes up and down all the time." (I11, RI)

In a sense, this is selfish revenge behavior, but it comes from taking the app reality as the truth. The app's time starts the clock that defines experienced lateness by the restaurant. Waiting is frustrating because it feels like losing money; the money that the app promised by oversimplifying reality. This is how the app makes it appear as if the restaurant causes you to lose money. Because you cannot vent the resulting frustration to the app, the rider lets it out by cancelling. This reinforces the realness of the app reality.

Just as riders enacted dehumanizing behavior toward restaurants, we also identified dehumanizing behavior that restaurants enacted toward riders. Restaurants did not allow riders to use their toilet, had a separate entrance for riders often not visible to outsiders, or did not allow them to enter their restaurant at all. In particular, some restaurants expressed not wanting to have riders inside to avoid any disruption of the nice vibe inside of the restaurant. Therefore, they often told them to wait outside. For example, a restaurant manager highlighted:

> "You're just a restaurant. You really want that the customers here is noticing as little as possible. Because it's a small restaurant as you can see. This means it very quickly looks like half an illegal phone store. The moment you have three, four guys with mopeds and bags like that in here all the time, and communication has to be done through the door. It becomes a bit shabby then [in the restaurant]." (I52, RS)

This dehumanizing behavior stripped away riders' basic human needs. It objectified and devalued riders, reducing them to a function like how robots have a specific function. A rider described experiencing this behavior:

> "The restaurant feels like the rider is just a rider. It doesn't matter what rider it is. It's just a delivery object kind of sometimes. Like the food is there, take it, you know. They treat you like you are a machine." (I21, RI)

Over time, this led to further misunderstandings, conflict escalation, and diminished trust between riders and restaurants in general, due to the neglect of emotions and individuality. One restaurant manager reported that interactions can become so disconnected, referring to it as "war" (I50, RS). Aggressive fights sometimes occurred between riders and restaurants. "It is so frustrating, so frustrating. And I have seen also many colleagues. They get fights like 'I'm waiting too much and got a discussion with the chefs" (I47, RI). The resulting transactional and disconnected interactions resulted in a poor exchange quality, leaving both parties feeling emotionally distant toward each other. One rider highlights this disconnected interaction:

> "So, they [restaurants] have their own job. So we're two separate people, doing two completely different jobs. Well, when you look at it from the outside, it appears, we are all altogether in this. But when you work for Uber Eats, it's just you realize that you are two completely different jobs and not connected to each other." (I21, RI)

In sum, actors' reification of the app was made manifest through dehumanizing behavior. They reciprocated the platform triadically, i.e., to another gig worker. Triadic reciprocity also reproduced the same externalities as the ones caused by dyadic reciprocity.

4.3.4 Repairing the social exchanges (triadic inverted reciprocity)

So far, we discussed dyadic reciprocity and triadic reciprocity, which both led to a deterioration of the exchange relationships. However, we also identified triadic inverted reciprocity when gig workers reciprocated the poor actions of the platform with positive behaviors. This could then initiate an improvement of the exchange relationship.

Analog duct taping. Analog duct taping is a short-term oriented behavioral response to the poor initiating action of the platform that does not reproduce that negativity. The gig worker intervenes to quickly fix problems that would be the responsibility of the platform. For example, restaurants expressed adopting quick fix actions to solve problems at their costs. They went for the solution which was the quickest fix to not get bothered with the problem at hand, for instance when they ran out of the food the customer had ordered, they offered the customer an alternative. Getting in touch with the platform during their work time was often too time consuming and frustrating. For riders, when client address was not up to date in the app, some riders delivered the food (off the clock) to the new address. Similarly, when customers called the restaurant because they ordered something wrong, some restaurants helped. Yet, it would have been the platform's responsibility to solve this issue because the platform is in charge for managing everything with the order. However, due to time pressure in the restaurant, restaurant managers often solved the issues with the client themselves (without the platform) to have the order out of their system. They used analogous solutions to fix online problems. One restaurant manager put it this way:

> "Well, fortunately most of the time it just goes well. And then you can solve it between yourself and the customer. [...] It makes no sense to me if someone has ordered wrong to say, you should call Deliveroo. So usually, we just try to solve it, because the order is running." (I42, RS)

The key is that this show a mindset of looking beyond the app's description of reality, and being pragmatic instead of frustrated when reality differs from the app. Restaurant managers engaged in additional extra work not to support the platform, but instead they recognized that things could be easier fixed in the transaction if they jumped in and took responsibility for the issue at hand.

Humanizing. This behavior was characterized by humanizing the exchange between food riders and restaurants. The focus was on starting to see each other as real human exchange partners and treat each other as a subject in contrast to an object. The gig workers enacting this behavior make explicit that it is a response to both the initiating action as well as the triadic reciprocity we describe above. For example, restaurant managers reported the need to pull riders out of what we called 'reifying the app and dehumanizing'. A restaurant manager expressed the need to manage them by stating "And ultimately you just want to create an environment where people are just motivated to work and also think of it's not a gaming room here. We do have to keep it serious." (I15, RS). Restaurant managers reported bad manners of riders we explained before such as just grabbing any prepared deliver bag (I50, RS) or only showing the order number on the phone but not talking to the restaurant staff (I42, RS). But here, some managers responded by explicitly asking riders to greet them before they looked where the order preparation is.

Some restaurants also invested in future social exchanges with riders by building future oriented ties. Restaurants gave riders nice things when they had to wait at the restaurant such as drinks, snacks or a heater. Thereby, restaurants made riders wait and not cancel the order but also invested in building high quality relationships with them for future social exchanges. A restaurant manager put it this way:

> "And not making them wait outside in the cold. Because in the end, you know, if they have it more comfortable, they do their job better, you get along better. And they'll also do their best for you a little bit better at the time when you are collaborating with them again. - If you make them wait outside in the rain or snow, while they have not had an order for two hours, you do not make them happy. Maybe they go home while at the time it gets busier you need them. So, in that way we always do seek contact with the riders." (I31, RS)

Riders clearly noticed this behavior by restaurants as they called them nice restaurants (e.g., I12, RI; I21, RI; I23, RI) but also noted that they were rare. The humanizing behavior of restaurants paid off because riders outlined feeling committed reciprocating the nice restaurants in a good manner. This could mean to wait longer or to even feel bad if one does not work. One rider noted that he feels guilty if he does not stand in front of the nice restaurant on the weekend:

> "I also get a free coffee from them nowadays, occasionally a piece of cake. That is nice. Then, I do feel guilty on a Saturday or Sunday when I don't go to work. Then I think I'll let them [restaurants] down, while I know they have enough riders in the neighborhood. Then, I yes it is nice if I am there on the weekend for them. But I was not there last weekend because there was Mother's Day. And I feel a little guilty. But when I lie in my bed in the morning, I think, yes, should I go or not. Then the alarm clock rings at 8 o'clock and then I think, yes, I should. Because otherwise I let them down." (I20, RI)

Sometimes these nice treatments from restaurants even led over time into friendship between riders and restaurants (e.g., I12, RI; I34, RI; I39, RI). In sum, humanizing improved the collaboration in the relationship between riders and restaurants. Especially because most exchange were not characterized by this. Further, the externalities either were then more easily accepted by the rider such as waiting, or the externalities could even be avoided as the parties trusted and could rely on each other.

Thus, we see virtuous reciprocity between riders and restaurants. We call this inverted triadic reciprocity because it is positive behavior toward the other gig worker as a reaction to poor treatment by the platform.

4.4 Discussion

We investigated how social exchanges unfold in the context of platform-mediated work. Specifically, restaurant managers and riders experienced poor treatment in their exchanges with the platform, which triggered three distinct social exchange mechanisms; two (self-oriented reciprocity and de-socializing the social exchanges) led to low-quality exchanges, and one mechanism (repairing the social exchanges) led to a higher-quality exchange – or, at least, the beginning of one.

4.4.1 Theoretical implications

We contribute three new mechanisms to social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Cropanzano et al., 2017). First, 'self-oriented reciprocity' is a new mechanism to SET because "less attention has been paid [by SET scholars] to relationship formation (or the absence) when subordinates are treated poorly" (Cropanzano et al., 2017, p. 2). We found that gig workers experience poor treatment by the platform as an initiating action to enact self-oriented reciprocity. Second, 'de-socializing the social exchanges' is new to SET because it is a triadic mechanism, which enriches SET by going beyond prior focus on dyadic exchanges. 'Repairing the social exchanges' is new to SET because it is triadic but also because it is inverted. That is, in contrast to prior work on reciprocity, we see a party reciprocate a negative action with a positive action. This counterintuitive phenomenon can happen because of the triadic nature; i.e., the positive action is directed toward a third party.

Beyond the specific mechanisms we also contribute to SET in two more general ways. First, we offer understanding on triadic social exchanges. That is, we find that the algorithm and its information asymmetry and power imbalance influence the exchanges between riders and restaurant staff beyond how the algorithm mediates the exchange. In fact, the triadic reciprocity occurred mostly where the algorithm failed to mediate. Our highlighting of such triadic mechanisms complements the recent insights on multi-foci relationship in psychological contract literature (Alcover et al., 2017a, 2017b) which found that several agents can influence the psychological contract between individual and organization. Likewise, we show that is crucial to understand the interactions between all parties involved to grasp if, when, and how low-quality and/or high-quality social exchanges develop.

Specifically, we observed two kinds of triadic reciprocity. First, the low-quality exchange in platform-rider and platform-restaurant staff exchanges were reciprocated, not only dyadically, but also in the rider-restaurant staff relation. Second, having a third party involved in the social exchange created the space for party 1 to reciprocate a positive action toward party 3 in reaction to a negative initiating action by party 2. Consequently, they directly engaged in work coordination as a situated practice (Bechky & Okhuysen, 2011) developing a shared understanding and mutual collaboration instead of engaging in mutual blaming. This triadic inverted reciprocity finding is in line with balance theory of networks' idea that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' (Heider, 1958; Hummon & Doreian, 2003).

An interesting question is why some gig workers exchanges engaged in de-socializing the exchange while others invert the cycle and engage in repairing the exchange. We saw people switching between de-socializing and repairing, so stable traits do not seem to be a key factor. Regarding an explanation based on the role, a key distinction between riders and restaurant staff is the share of exposure to the app's description of the world. For restaurant staff, their platform activities represent a small share of their business. By contrast, most riders did not experience food delivery activity outside of the platform. The exposure to alternative institutions allows many restaurants to go beyond being an extension of the app and reclaim their agency in exchanges on the platform (Seo & Creed, 2002). Restaurants then can convince riders. When they switched to look beyond their dyadic relationship with the platform toward seeing the other parties (i.e., restaurants and riders) as their exchange partners, then actors enacted triadic inverted reciprocity. Thus, the exposure to the app vs. alternative ways to do the work seems the most likely explanation.

Second, which exchange mechanisms are enacted influences external parties. Specifically, we find externalities, which we characterized as effects of the social exchanges on parties outside of the focal exchanges. Pfeffer (2010) highlighted that 'there is little focus on the social externalities created by work practices' (p. 4). Indeed, prior social exchange theory research has focused on internal dyadic relationships where the outcomes of actions are fully internalized within one relationship (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In that setting, the social exchange mechanism 'reciprocity' could fully explain how the social exchange relationship developed (Cropanzano et al., 2017). However, we identified outcomes that were not internalized. Instead, we found that, when multiple 'independent' parties interact with each other, dyadic social exchanges become less controllable because they are influenced by third parties. For instance, the rider-platform relationship can be negatively impacted by the restaurant not preparing the food in time. Then, the rider has unpaid waiting times. The presence of the third party created wiggle room for actors to avoid effort and let costs be 'someone else's problem' (i.e., externalize), and this was exacerbated by the initiating action and self-oriented reciprocity. By contrast, 'repairing the social exchanges' helped to re-internalize the externalities via analog duct taping or humanizing.

We also add to the gig work literature by showing how work is reconfigured by the new economic governance of platforms as permissive potentates (Vallas & Schor, 2020). We offer understanding on the implications this has for the social fabric of work (Cameron, 2022; Curchod et al., 2020). Specifically, we theorized the platform context into lived experiences of gig workers by connecting the organizational governance and interactions between actors. By doing so, we add some critical nuances to gig work. The gig work sociology literature offers insights on the precarity of gig work (Friedman, 2014; Sutherland et al., 2020). Furthermore, the management and OB literature on gig work has assumed that gig work is mainly about individual agency (Caza et al., 2022), highlighting features such as freedom regarding working time (Petriglieri et al., 2019), and consisting of quick economic exchanges (Cropanzano et al., 2023). Our results have implications for both. Complexity is coming from this new governance that externalizes responsibilities and thereby, heavily impacts how interactions between social actors unfold. The competing ways of interacting with other social actors (de-socializing vs. repairing the social exchanges) causes misunderstanding that is disrupting the social fabric which is integral to gig workers' lived experience. It was very salient for gig workers that there were good and bad actors, but often it was unclear to which camp the current exchange partner belonged.

Furthermore, gig workers need to navigate these externalities. Studies on gig workers' psychological experiences or human resource management on platforms (Meijerink et al., 2021), have highlighted that stress and anxiety come from the task or working conditions (Ashford et al., 2018; Petriglieri et al., 2019) – we find here these come from navigating the governance together with other parties, especially when scripts are not available for interactions that are happening outside of its constructed exchange reality and is as such mainly hidden. Thereby, we add to the recognition of hidden labor – or: ghost work (Gray & Suri, 2019) – that arises from the governance characterized by centralized power and decentralized control. We show how the inherent nature of the new world of work is organized (Colbert et al., 2016) by a big amount of work that the platform designs to be hidden to not only outsiders, but also insiders.

4.4.2 Limitations and future research

Although we included different exchange partners in our sampling, we did not talk to representatives of platforms. We build theory based on the common perception of the other exchange partners (restaurant and rider) based on how they both saw the actions and role of the exchange partner, the platform, allowing us to validate our arguments. Nevertheless, we did not obtain any direct input from the platforms, which could offer additional insights into the governance structure and their view of the (social) exchanges with food riders and restaurants. For example, while we identified a more passive laissez faire role of platforms, research could investigate how platforms might vary in their app designs and thereby aim to actively shape their role of a more laissez faire or a more accessible exchange partner.

Second, the findings of the study are unique for gig workers' lived experiences. We have shown that a well-established theory needs to be expanded to be applicable in the gig economy. We found that due to the different reciprocity mechanisms gig workers do not always speak the same 'language' when interacting with each other. Yet, for several concepts having a mutual understanding is core, for instance, to develop a social identity (Jenkins, 2014) or to promote organizational identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Foreman & Whetten, 2002). Thus, these are promising concepts to investigate in future research. Further, linked to the different reciprocity mechanisms, different types of behaviors emerged, namely dehumanizing versus humanizing, that made us think of identity and image work. While dehumanizing indicated an identity gig workers' adopted from the algorithm, humanizing seems to be about creating an image of a humanized world. Future research is needed to investigate potentially interesting dynamics between identity work (Sugiyama et al., 2022) and image work (Williams & Murphy, 2022) in the gig economy.

Third, false reciprocity. Strikingly, the self-oriented reciprocity did not impact the exchange quality with the platform because the platform is an empty vacuum, except for the fact that the algorithm's self-learning aspect is programmed to optimize (e.g., delivery times). Thus, the platform enacted a 'false reciprocity'. That is, parties felt they react to the initiating action of the platform as they perceived to be in an exchange relationship with the platform, but the platform did not reciprocate the (responding) action of the gig worker. We did not include this in our analysis of the data as this phenomenon is mostly the absence of something happening, and false reciprocity is not part of the initiating action. Future research could combine psychological contract theory and social exchange theory to understand when people form the expectations that make the absence of actions an initiating action in itself.

4.4.3 Practical implications

This research has implications for policymakers such as the European Commission and user experience (UX) designers. The information asymmetry and limited communication flow between exchange partners impedes parties by default to collaborate and anticipate each other. Therefore, for policy makers it shows the relevance to promote transparency obligations such as explainable AI for online labor platforms (Hafermalz & Huysman, 2022). Further, for UX designers it shows the importance of improving communication channels in the app to enable collaboration between exchange partners.

Furthermore, as we showed that the platform support service for gig workers was inadequate it is important to release policies ensuring a better quality of the platform service (Gegenhuber et al., 2021). More transparency is needed about the quality of the platform service to promote better working conditions for gig workers. If there is more transparency about the service differences, gig workers can actively decide to join platforms safeguarding good working conditions.

Finally, we saw the important role app designs play for the work experience of gig workers. To illustrate, restaurant managers expressed how the unsophisticated app design was constraining their work in the actual restaurant. Riders described the constrain of not being able to see the history of the order at the restaurant (e.g., if there was another rider before who had already waited long). Here we see an essential role for well-designed apps guaranteeing a good user experience and algorithmic management in optimizing relationships. Such practical implications are relevant to improve relationships in digital workplaces (Colbert et al., 2016).

Chapter 5

A multi-stakeholder approach to stimulating sustainable careers for contingent workers: Mapping paradoxes and actionable desirable futures

Samenvatting

Hoe kunnen belanghebbenden van flexwerk leiding geven aan het opbouwen en ondersteunen van duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers? Om die vraag te beantwoorden verzamelden en analyseerden we in dit onderzoek informatie met meerdere belanghebbenden in een 'wenselijke-toekomst-georiënteerd lab'. Een groep van 50 belanghebbenden die te maken hebben met flexwerk namen deel aan het lab. Deze groep bestond uit leiders op verschillende managementniveaus bij bemiddelaars op de arbeidsmarkt, klantorganisaties en vakbonden, beleidsmakers en platformdirecteuren, onderzoekers en flexwerkers. Uit de data analyse komen verschillende paradoxen naar voren waarmee belanghebbenden worden geconfronteerd, namelijk: (1) economische versus welzijnslogica, (2) standaardisatie versus maatwerk en (3) moderne werkvormen versus traditionele wet- en regelgeving. Vervolgens analyseerden we de paradoxen in het kader van duurzame loopbanen en schetsten we gewenste toekomstscenario's richting meer duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers en bespreken routes naar effectief leiderschap hierin. In het bijzonder raden we leiders aan zich te richten op het bevorderen van welzijn, oog te hebben voor uiteenlopende behoeften, en één juridisch kader te scheppen over de grenzen van organisaties heen.

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Abstract

How can stakeholders regarding contingent work take the lead in building and supporting sustainable careers for flex workers? To answer this question, in this study, we gathered and analysed information as part of a 'desirable-future-oriented lab' with multiple stakeholders. 50 expert stakeholders who deal with contingent work participated in the lab. This group included stakeholders at different levels of leadership at labor market intermediaries, client organizations, labor unions, policymakers, platform directors, researchers, and flex workers. From the data analysis, the following paradoxes emerged : (1) economic versus well-being logic, (2) standardization versus customization, and (3) modern employment modes versus traditional laws and regulations. Subsequently, we mapped these paradoxes using a sustainable career framework and outlined desired future scenarios. We propose actionable routes of effective leadership toward sustainable careers for flex workers. In particular, we recommend that leaders focus on promoting well-being, pay attention to diverse needs, and create a legal framework across organizational boundaries.

Keywords: sustainable careers, multi-stakeholder approach, contingent work, contingent workers, paradoxes

5.1 Inleiding

> "Gelijkwaardige kansen op werk, op inkomen, op een gezonde en duurzame loopbaan. De eerste belangrijkste les is, dat ik nu nog veel scherper zie dat veel groepen in Nederland die gelijkwaardige kansen niet krijgen. En hoe belangrijk het is daar iets aan te doen. Ik kan dat als minister niet alleen. Dat kan alleen samen met werkgevers, vakbonden, onderwijsinstellingen, uitzenders en andere partijen die op de arbeidsmarkt actief zijn."

(Karien van Gennip, pagina 1, 2022)

In het bovenstaande citaat benadrukt Karien van Gennip, de toenmalige Nederlandse minister van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, de noodzaak om actie te ondernemen om de werk- en loopbaanomstandigheden van flexwerkers te verbeteren (ABU, 2022). Meer specifiek roept zij de partijen die hierbij betrokken zijn op om leiderschap te tonen. Leiderschap is nodig, omdat de meeste flexwerkers onzekere werkomstandigheden hebben (Spreitzer et al., 2017), wat onder andere kan leiden tot angstgevoelens of een burn-out (Petriglieri et al., 2019; Sayre, 2023). Bovendien staat de duurzaamheid van hun loopbaan op lange termijn op het spel (Kost et al., 2020). Duurzame loopbanen worden immers gekenmerkt door een balans in geluk, gezondheid en productiviteit, waarbij het individu tijdens de loopbaan hulpbronnen kan vernieuwen in plaats van uitputten (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden et al., 2020). Leiderschap kan een bijdrage leveren aan het waarborgen van een bevlogen, gezonde en effectieve wijze van werken in de context van flexwerk door het aanbieden en ondersteunen van zulke hulpbronnen. Kortom, er bestaat een behoefte aan ondersteunend loopbaangericht leiderschap voor deze groep werkenden (Zhang et al., 2015).

Maar hoe je leiding geeft aan een groep van werkers die in de regel vaak en snel van organisatie wisselen is niet duidelijk. Volgens Freese et al. (2017) zijn er "nog veel onbeantwoorde onderzoeksvragen op het terrein van de arbeids- en organisatiepsychologie, zoals over leiderschap, motivatie en werkstress van flexwerkers" (p. 241). Leiderschap voor flexwerkers is een gedeelde verantwoordelijkheid van verschillende belanghebbenden (Retkowsky et al., 2023a) zoals de regering, uitzendbureaus, detacheerders, platformen en anderen. Dit leiderschap is onder meer belegd bij toezichthouders, projectmanagers, teamleiders, HR-personeel, mentoren, klantcontacten, afdelingshoofden, contractmanagers, trainingsdeskundigen en uitvoerend management. In het vervolg van dit artikel beschouwen we leiderschap vanuit het perspectief van al deze stakeholders om een brede toepasbaarheid te waarborgen. Daarbij zullen we in voorbeelden concrete belanghebbenden noemen om het verhaal voor de lezer tastbaarder te maken.

Voor de maatschappij is het gebrek aan duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers problematisch, want flexwerkers vormen een grote en cruciale groep op de arbeidsmarkt. Flexwerkers zijn werkenden met kortlopende contracten bij organisaties (Katz & Krueger, 2019). In het tweede kwartaal van 2023 hadden 2,8 miljoen werkenden een flexcontract en waren er 1,2 miljoen zzp'ers. Samen zijn dat bijna 4 miljoen flexwerkers op de Nederlandse arbeidsmarkt. Daarmee zijn vier op de tien werkenden in Nederland flexwerker (CBS, 2023). 28% was in tijdelijke dienst, uitzendkracht of oproepkracht en 13% was zzp'er (Flexbarometer, 2023). Flexwerkers worden beschreven als ‘de vogelvrije werkende’ (Kroon et al., 2022). Bij flexwerkers wordt het financiële risico van een dienstverband verlegd van de organisatie naar het individu. De organisatie bespaart op in arbeidsovereenkomsten vastgelegde ondersteuning, zoals training en ontwikkeling, pensioenopbouw, zorg- en risicoverzekeringen, en werk-zorgregelingen, hetgeen leidt tot allerlei risico’s zoals uitval, onbenut potentieel en ongelijkheid op de arbeidsmarkt ten opzichte van mensen met een (vast) arbeidscontract.

De literatuur over flexwerkers biedt weinig inzicht in dit probleem van gebrek aan duurzaamheid in loopbanen (Kost et al., 2020). Onderzoek kijkt vooral naar momentopnames van werkervaringen bij één organisatie, en gaat daarmee voorbij aan de loopbaanontwikkeling bij flexwerkers over meerdere organisaties heen (Retkowsky et al., 2023a). Hoe leiders ondersteuning kunnen bieden aan flexwerkers wordt in de flexwerkliteratuur gezien als een complexe en belangrijke ‘management challenge’ (Connelly & Gallagher, 2004b, p. 146). Voor flexwerk blijkt het bijzonder lastig om deze uitdaging aan te gaan (Anderson & Bidwell, 2019; Gallagher & Sverke, 2005), niet het minst omdat de stem van leidinggevenden grotendeels ontbreekt in de flexwerkliteratuur (Bonet et al., 2013). Leiderschap ligt daarbij bovendien bij verschillende stakeholders en wordt gezien als een gedeelde verantwoordelijkheid, wat de uitdaging voor leiders extra complex maakt. De huidige leiderschapsliteratuur biedt daarbij weinig inzicht, omdat deze primair is gericht op een dyadische relatie tussen leidinggevende en werknemer, waarbij beiden in dezelfde organisatie werkzaam zijn (Schneider, 2002). De literatuur die specifieker ingaat op loopbaanbegeleiding in organisaties is ook niet algemeen toepasbaar voor flexwerkers (Sulbout et al., 2022), omdat daarin doorgaans wordt uitgegaan van relatief vaste en langdurige loopbaanpaden in één organisatie en een beperkt aantal partijen of ‘stakeholders’. Maar flexwerk gebeurt buiten de traditionele grenzen van organisaties zonder vast organisatorisch kader (Ashford et al., 2018; Van den Groenendaal et. al., 2022). Bovendien hebben flexwerkers vaak een opeenvolging van verschillende organisaties waarvoor of waarmee ze werken, en zijn er loopbaanfasen zonder werk. Eén enkele organisatie kan dan ook geen voldoende ondersteunend systeem bieden om flexwerkers duurzaam aan het werk te houden. Bij uitzendwerk is er bijvoorbeeld een driehoeksverhouding tussen de uitzendkracht, het uitzendbureau en de klantorganisatie (Meijerink & Arets, 2021). En bij platformwerk is er vaak ook sprake van meerdere betrokkenen, zoals de platformwerker (ook wel kluswerker genoemd), klanten/consumenten en een platform dat met een algoritme dat geheel coördineert (Duggan et al., 2020). Vanuit een breder perspectief van leiderschap is de situatie van flexwerk complex omdat niet alleen de directe leidinggevenden en werkgevers een rol spelen, maar ook beleidsmakers en wetgevers.

Kortom, we weten dat flexwerkers zich vaak bewegen in een context van onzekere arbeidsomstandigheden, zoals baanonzekerheid en inkomensinstabiliteit (Ashford et al., 2007; Connelly & Gallagher, 2004a, Langerak et al., 2022), maar we moeten nog meer inzicht krijgen in wat leiders kunnen doen om ervoor te zorgen dat flexwerkers gelukkig, gezond en productief worden en blijven (Retkowsky et al., 2023a).

Het is daarvoor essentieel om vanuit verschillende betrokken partijen en met een loopbaanperspectief naar deze complexe thematiek te kijken (Retkowsky et al., 2023a). Ons onderzoek levert een unieke bijdrage aan dit complexe vraagstuk door verschillende belanghebbenden samen te brengen en op die manier de toekomst te co-creëren (Gümüsay & Reinecke, 2022). We brachten verschillende belanghebbenden samen in het DLF Lab (Duurzame Loopbanen voor Flexwerkers Lab). Hier kwamen uiteenlopende belanghebbenden (N=50) bijeen die betrokken zijn bij flexwerk in Nederland. De groep bestond uit managers die dagelijks met flexwerkers werken, managers die op strategisch niveau met flexwerkers te maken hebben, platformeigenaren en beleidsmakers. Uit de data analyse komen verschillende paradoxen naar voren die we in kaart brachten met behulp van het raamwerk van duurzame loopbanen (De Vos et al., 2020). Op basis daarvan stellen we routes voor met betrekking tot hoe effectief leiderschap naar een gewenste toekomst kan leiden. Onze onderzoeksvraag hierbij is: *Hoe zien belanghebbenden van flexwerk dat zij leiding kunnen geven aan het opbouwen en ondersteunen van duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers en welke uitdagingen en kansen zien zij daarbij?*

De bijdrage van dit artikel is tweevoudig. Ten eerste leveren we een bijdrage aan de wetenschappelijke literatuur over leiderschap in tijden van flexibilisering (Schneider, 2002; Sutherland et al., 2022). Meer in het bijzonder laten we zien dat de verschillende belanghebbenden drie paradoxen ervaren (nl. economische versus welzijnslogica; standaardisatie versus maatwerk en moderne werkvormen versus traditionele wet- en regelgeving). Door deze paradoxen inzichtelijk te maken kunnen de verschillende belanghebbenden op een lijn komen om inzichten voor effectief leiderschap te bieden. Indirect geeft dit een invulling aan de managementuitdaging binnen de flexwerkliteratuur (Connelly & Gallagher, 2004b). Ten tweede dragen we bij aan de wetenschappelijke literatuur over duurzame loopbanen (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden et al., 2020). We laten de paradoxen zien die belanghebbenden tegenkomen bij het realiseren van een bevlogen, gezonde en effectieve wijze van werken in de context van flexwerk.

Duurzame loopbanen worden in dit artikel gedefinieerd als "een opeenvolging van loopbaanervaringen met een veelheid van patronen van continuïteit door de tijd heen in verschillende sociale contexten. Die opeenvolging wordt gekenmerkt door individueel eigenaarschap, waardoor de loopbaan betekenis heeft voor het individu" (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015, p. 7). Volgens De Vos et al. (2020) en Van der Heijden et al. (2020) zijn gezondheid, geluk en productiviteit de hoofdindicatoren voor de duurzaamheid van loopbanen. Meer specifiek betogen zij dat deze drie aspecten gedurende de gehele loopbaan in een bepaalde mate en in balans met elkaar gewaarborgd moeten worden. Bovendien pleit het duurzame loopbaanperspectief voor een dynamische wisselwerking tussen persoon, context en tijd. Hoewel 'loopbaanduurzaamheid' begint met een persoon, zijn er belangrijke factoren zoals context (bijv. institutioneel of beroepsmatig) en tijd (bijv. gebeurtenissen en veranderingen) die van invloed zijn op de duurzaamheid van de loopbaan.

Het model van duurzame loopbanen pleit voor een holistische kijk op loopbaanervaringen van flexwerkers. In de flexwerkliteratuur is er echter relatief weinig aandacht voor andere belanghebbenden, naast de flexwerkers zelf, die ook een cruciale rol spelen in de duurzaamheid van een loopbaan (Koene et al., 2021; Lorquet et al., 2018). Om deze belanghebbenden te voorzien van input voor concrete actieplannen om duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers te bevorderen, co-creëren we in het DLF Lab samen de toekomst met praktijkmensen. We volgen hierbij Gümüsay en Reinecke (2022) die het volgende stellen: "It is time for us as management scholars to use the methodological and theoretical toolkit at our disposal to co-create the future; and to actively feed forward soci(et)al change – not despite theory, but through it." (p. 236). In de volgende paragraaf leggen we uit hoe we dit precies doen.

5.2 Methode

5.2.1 Procedure en steekproef

In deze paper baseren we ons op de wenselijke-toekomsten-methode (Gümüsay & Reinecke, 2022). Dit is een nieuw type participatieve methode (Bleijenbergh, 2023) om inzichten te genereren samen met experts. In het betrekken van experts lijkt het op een Delphi-studie, maar een belangrijk verschil is dat Delphi studies zich richten op het begrijpen van de meest waarschijnlijke toekomst, terwijl de wenselijke toekomst methode zich richt om het samen begrijpen van een gewenste toekomst. In tegenstelling tot action research richt onze methode zich niet op het documenteren van een interventie- en implementatieproces, maar we richten ons op een eerdere fase van het bredere begrijpen van de relatie tussen de huidige situatie en de gewenste toekomst.

We brachten verschillende partijen samen door het organiseren van een 'future lab' (Gümüsay & Reinecke, 2022); een evenement genaamd DLF Lab (Duurzame Loopbanen voor Flexwerkers Lab). Hier kwamen uiteenlopende expert belanghebbenden (N=50) bijeen die betrokken zijn bij flexwerk in Nederland. Het evenement duurde vier uur en vond plaats bij een Nederlandse universiteit. We hebben deze belanghebbenden met name samengebracht om uitdagingen en kansen bij het ondersteunen van de loopbaan van flexwerkers te begrijpen om duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers te co-creëren. Een belangrijke opmerking hierbij is dat onder deze deelnemers ook twee flexwerkers aanwezig waren. We wilden de stem van de flexwerkers integreren omdat het unieke inzichten kan geven in de uitdagingen en kansen voor leiders. De nadruk lag echter op hoe leiders kunnen bijdragen aan duurzame loopbanen van flexwerkers, vandaar de focus op leiders in de context van flexwerk. Dit evenement was onderdeel van een groter project naar flexibel werk en flexibele loopbanen, waarin uitgebreid onderzoek gedaan is onder en met flexwerkers (Retkowsky, 2024).

De selectiecriteria voor deelnemers waren dat participanten belanghebbenden of expert waren in de context van flexwerk. Dit kunnen mensen zijn die dagelijks te maken hebben met flexwerkers, zoals teamleiders of contactpersonen bij het uitzendbureau of die zich bezighouden met strategische zaken, zoals HRM of wetgeving, bijvoorbeeld beleidsmakers of HR-managers rondom flexwerkers, of onderzoekers op het gebied van (flex)werk. We hanteerden een gemengde wervingsstrategie bestaande uit (1) een open oproep via een nieuwsbrief en promotievideo op social media en (2) persoonlijke uitnodigingen. De twee flexwerkers waren persoonlijk uitgenodigd. Tabel 5.1 geeft een overzicht van alle deelnemers.

5.2.2 Dataverzameling

Tijdens het lab verzamelden we data op drie complementaire manieren: (1) vragenlijst met open vragen, (2) plenaire discussie gebaseerd op input van de vragenlijst, en (3) rondetafelgesprekken.

Vragenlijst. Twee weken voor het evenement stuurden we een vragenlijst naar de 50 deelnemers. 25 van hen vulden de vragenlijst in. Deze bestond uit vragen over uitdagingen en

Tabel 5.1 Overzicht van deelnemende experts en vier typen flexwerkers met wie zij in hun werk te maken hebben

Expert-nr.	Verbonden aan	Functie	Uitzend-kracht	Klus-werker	Zzp'er	Oproep-kracht
1	Vakbond	Bestuurslid vakbond (verantwoordelijk voor flexwerk)	x	x	x	x
2	Stichting	Consultant	x			x
3	Uitzendbureau	Programmamanager voor ontwikkelingsprogramma	x			
4	Uitzendbureau	Senior propositiemarketeer	x		x	
5	Uitzendbureau	Accountmanager werkvertrouwen (sociaal domein)	x			
6	Uitzendbureau	Directeur Werkvertrouwen	x			
7	Uitzendbureau	Accountmanager	x			
8	Uitzendbureau	Teamleider (contract en duurzaamheid)	x		x	x
9	Uitzendbureau	Recruitment marketeer	x			
10	Uitzendbureau	Algemeen hoofd openbare zaken	x	x	x	
11	Uitzendbureau	Vestigingsmanager	x		x	x
12	Uitzendbureau	Directeur maatschappelijk verantwoord ondernemen	x	x	x	x
13	Uitzendbureau	Directeur of operations	x			x
14	Uitzendbureau	Projectmanager L&D	x			
15	Klantorganisatie	Flexmanager	x	x	x	x
16	Klantorganisatie	Beleidssecretaris onderwijs en arbeidsmarkt	x		x	x
17	Platform	Manager werkverdeling		x	x	
18	Platform	CEO		x		
19	Platform	CEO		x		
20	Platform	CEO	x	x	x	x
21	Platform	CEO		x	x	
22	Platform	CEO	x	x	x	
23	Extern dienstenplatform voor flexwerkers	CEO		x	x	
24	HR-dienstverlener	Verzuimspecialist	x			
25	Online leerplatform	Senior accountmanager duurzame inzetbaarheid	x	x	x	x
26	Online platform voor loopbaancoaching	Coördinator en loopbaancoach	x			

27	Opleidingencentra	Strategisch Programmamanager Leven Lang Ontwikkelen MBO	x		x	x
28	Adviesdienst voor flexwerk	Projectadviseur voor duurzame inzetbaarheid en levenslange ontwikkeling	x		x	
29	Adviesdienst voor flexwerk	Projectadviseur	x		x	
30	Coaching	Beherend vennoot	x			
31	Overheid	Beleidsadviseur	x	x	x	x
32	Overheid	Senior beleidsadviseur	x	x	x	
33	Overheid	Adviseur servicepunt flex	x			
34	Overheid	Beleidsadviseur	x			
35	Overheid	Nationaal adviseur servicepunt flex				
36	Overheid	Beleidsadviseur	x			
37	Overheid	Beleidsmaker	x			x
38	Overheid	Adviseur onderzoek en beleid				
39	Advocatenkantoor	Advocaat	x	x	x	x
40	Consultancy	Consultant		x		
41	Instelling	Onderzoeksadviseur				
42	Hogeschool	Onderzoeker freelancers			x	
43	Universiteit	Onderzoeker arbeidsrecht	x	x	x	x
44	Universiteit	Onderzoeker werkzekerheid			x	
45	Instelling	Senior onderzoeker toekomst van werk	x		x	
46	Universiteit	Onderzoeker zzp’ers			x	
47	Universiteit	Onderzoeker flexwerk	x	x	x	x
48	Universiteit	Onderzoeker flexwerk	x		x	x
49	Wilde niet genoemd worden met informatie over expertpositie					
50	Wilde niet genoemd worden met informatie over expertpositie					

manieren om duurzame loopbanen van flexwerkers te stimuleren: "Wat is volgens uw een duurzame loopbaan voor flexwerkers?", "Wat is een uitdaging in de praktijk die u in uw werk tegenkomt die het bevorderen van duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers belemmert?", en "Wat is een belangrijk inzicht/ best practice dat u hebt met betrekking tot het bevorderen van duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers?". Respondenten werd gevraagd hierbij hun antwoord te specificeren in het licht van het type flexwerker waarmee zij te maken hadden.

Plenaire discussie. Aan het begin van het evenement gingen we dieper in op de vragenlijstresultaten in een plenaire discussie, om gedetailleerde data te verzamelen over de kwesties die de deelnemers aankaartten, en ook bijkomende input te krijgen van participanten die de vragenlijst niet hadden ingevuld. Het doel was zowel om te divergeren (brainstormen) als convergeren (Stroebe et al., 2010). In eerste instantie focusten we ons hierbij op divergeren. We informeerden naar aanvullende of andere inzichten, en moedigden verdere brainstorming aan. In tweede instantie moedigden we deelnemers aan om te convergeren en gezamenlijk orde te brengen in en zin te geven aan de resultaten. Deze stappen hielpen ons om de gedachten die de deelnemers via de vragenlijst met ons deelden verder te begrijpen en te verrijken.

Rondetafelgesprekken. Verder hielden we drie parallelle rondetafelgesprekken over belangrijke thema's die op basis van de vragenlijst werden gedetecteerd: (1) loopbanen voor flexwerkers, (2) de toekomst van platformen en (3) sociale zekerheid en flexwerk. Het doel was om, voortbouwend op de algemene discussie in de plenaire sessie, vruchtbare discussies te hebben waarin mensen inzichten konden delen. Het onderwerp van de ronde tafel diende als een startpunt om mensen aan te moedigen na te denken en inzichten te delen. De deelnemers konden zelf kiezen aan welke tafel ze deelnamen. Elk rondetafelgesprek werd gefaciliteerd door een onderzoeker van het onderzoeksteam.

Tijdens de plenaire discussie en rondetafelgesprekken hebben we aantekeningen gemaakt in plaats van opnamen om ervoor te zorgen dat de deelnemers zich veilig voelden om zich te uiten en in discussie te gaan. De aantekeningen werden gemaakt door twee notulisten die specifiek voor dit doel aanwezig waren. Zij vergeleken achteraf hun aantekeningen om zorg te dragen voor nauwkeurigheid en volledigheid. Daarnaast werden deze aantekeningen ook vergeleken met de aantekening van de onderzoeker die de gesprekken faciliteerde.

Tot slot reflecteren we hier op onze eigen positie als onderzoekers in dit project. Hoewel we de vragenlijst en discussies open hebben gehouden, hebben we als onderzoekers ook bepaalde inzichten en ideeën over de loopbanen van flexwerkers. We geloven dat iedereen recht heeft op een duurzame loopbaan en dat precaire loopbanen van flexwerkers aandacht en verbetering vereist. We zien onze focus op duurzame loopbanen en het gebruik een theoretisch raamwerk waarin duurzame loopbanen centraal staan als een kracht, waardoor we kunnen bijdragen aan het co-creëren van de duurzame toekomst voor flexwerkers.

5.2.3 Data analyse

De aanpak van Gümüsay en Reinecke (2022) is uniek in de manier waarop het (nieuw verzamelde) gegevensinzichten combineert met theorie. De methode streeft naar het begrijpen van de status quo, een mogelijke alternatieve toekomst buiten die status quo, en actieplannen die naar die toekomst leiden. In paragraaf 3 bespreken we de huidige status quo aan de hand van drie paradoxen die voortkwamen uit onze data. In paragraaf 4 bespreken hoe deze paradoxen vanuit een duurzame loopbaanperspectief mogelijk kunnen leiden tot gewenste toekomstscenario's. In paragraaf 5 laten we actieplannen uit de data zien en verbinden we die plannen met literatuur om routes uit te stippelen richting die toekomstscenario's. Specifiek betekent dit dat onze analysestappen er als volgt uitzagen:

1. Status quo begrijpen. In de eerste stap hebben we citaten uit de vragenlijst en inzichten van de plenaire discussie en rondetafelgesprekken geclusterd. Deze drie gegevensbronnen waren hierbij even belangrijk en werden als complementair gezien voor het beter begrijpen van de belangen rondom het ontwikkelen van duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers. De gegevens zijn geclusterd op basis van onderwerp. We noemden de clusters paradoxen omdat paradoxen betrekking hebben op "problemen waarbij de integratie van verschillende alternatieven in een enkele overkoepelende oplossing vereist is" (Karhu & Ritala, 2018, p. 24). Vervolgens hebben we de clusters zodanig gelabeld dat duidelijk werd wat de kern van deze paradoxen was. Bij het bepalen van die labels bleven we zo dicht mogelijk bij de framing van participanten in het lab. De waarde van de combinatie van de drie bronnen (nl., vragenlijst, panel en rondetafelgesprek) blijkt uit de uiteindelijke paradoxen die we presenteren. Het zijn clusters, en niet louter een herhaling, of een samenvatting van de antwoorden op de vragenlijst en de discussies tijdens de plenaire sessie of rondetafelgesprekken. Hoewel de eerste stap geen gebruik maakt van theorie om de data te analyseren, komen die data wel uit het lab dat is opgezet vanuit het concept van duurzame loopbanen. De paradoxen die we presenteren, reflecteren de status quo van de duurzaamheid van de loopbanen van flexwerkers en de belangen die dit vormgeven en in stand houden.

2. Wenselijke toekomst schetsen. In de tweede stap plaatsen we de paradoxen in een breder perspectief, te weten het theoretische raamwerk van duurzame loopbanen (De Vos et al., 2020). Hier integreren we de theorie dan ook meer expliciet. Bijvoorbeeld, we stellen dat paradox 3 raakvlakken heeft met de concepten context en tijd uit het raamwerk. Daarom is bij deze paradox de wenselijke toekomst er een waarin met context en tijd rekening gehouden wordt door leiders. De paradoxen zijn niet verder geïnterpreteerd of gelabeld met een hoger niveau van abstractie. Dat is niet nodig volgens de aanpak die Gümüsay en Reinecke's (2022) bespreken.

3. Routes formuleren. In de derde stap hebben we routes ontwikkeld voor leiders die van de status quo naar een meer wenselijke toekomst (m.a.w. de bestemming) kunnen leiden, in navolging van het werk van Gümüsay en Reinecke (2022). De stap naar routes voor de toekomst is niet gebaseerd op theorie maar op de data. Meer concreet hebben we eerst de actieplannen uit de vragenlijst, de plenaire discussie, en de rondetafelgesprekken gecategoriseerd op basis van de wenselijke toekomst die ze beschrijven en hoe deze de huidige situatie (status quo) kan helpen verbeteren. Vervolgens labelden we de actieplannen binnen elk paradox om specifiek duidelijk te maken welke actoren worden aangemoedigd om leiderschap te tonen. In deze stap gebruiken we alleen onze interpretatie en literatuur, en we verbinden daarmee de actieplannen aan de wenselijke toekomst.

5.3 Status quo: huidige paradoxen

In het lab kwamen drie paradoxen naar voren voor duurzame loopbaanontwikkeling van flexwerkers: (1) economische versus welzijnslogica, (2) standaardisatie versus maatwerk en (3) moderne werkvormen versus traditionele wet- en regelgeving.

5.3.1 Paradox 1: economische versus welzijnslogica

Tijdens het evenement kwam naar voren dat alle stakeholders van mening waren dat er te weinig wordt geïnvesteerd in flexwerkers, bijvoorbeeld op het gebied van welzijn en (loopbaan)ontwikkeling. Er werd besproken dat een welzijnslogica met een focus op de lange termijn vaak ontbreekt bij klantorganisaties en bemiddelaars op de arbeidsmarkt als het gaat om loopbaanondersteuning voor flexwerkers. Eén deelnemer – die als coach voor flexwerkers werkt en hen helpt om vitaal te blijven – gaf bijvoorbeeld in de vragenlijst aan:

> "Uitzendorganisaties kijken te vaak naar het korte-termijnrendement van een flexwerker en de inlener voelt zich niet verantwoordelijk voor de duurzame inzetbaarheid van de flexwerker. De flexwerker valt hierdoor tussen wal en schip." [Expert 30]

Kortom, er speelt een paradox waarbij enerzijds de *welzijnslogica* op de lange termijn speelt, met als kernvraag hoe flexwerkers gezond en inzetbaar kunnen worden en blijven. Anderzijds speelt de *economische logica* waarbij korte-termijn-rendement voorop staat. Beide perspectieven zijn waardevol, maar het economische perspectief blijkt momenteel dominant. In het bijzonder werd tijdens de bijeenkomst benadrukt dat de paradox tussen de twee benaderingen vooral problematisch is als er sprake is van een machtsongelijkheid tussen organisaties en flexwerkers. Dat wil zeggen dat de werkgever niet afhankelijk is van de flexwerker, maar de flexwerker wel van de werkgever. Immers, de werkgever kan 'zomaar' een andere flexwerker inhuren uit puur economische overwegingen, terwijl die flexwerker afhankelijk is van de werkgever en dit vaak nodig heeft om rond te kunnen komen. Het welzijn van de flexwerker is daarbij van ondergeschikt belang. Opvallend hierbij is dat de discussie over flexwerkers zich primair richtte op de flexwerkers in precaire werkomstandigheden, terwijl er ook flexwerkers zijn (zoals professionals die hun diensten via platforms aanbieden) die veel minder financieel afhankelijk zijn van werkgevers of andere belanghebbenden. In die gevallen zou deze paradox wellicht minder prominent spelen. De deelnemers aan het lab kwamen tot de conclusie dat het gevaar bestaat dat welzijnslogica te weinig aandacht krijgt, waardoor de loopbanen van deze flexwerkers minder of niet duurzaam zijn als er niet meer aandacht komt voor hun welzijn vanuit de belanghebbenden die hierin een leidende rol hebben, zoals werkgevers en beleidsmakers. Sterker nog: zij signaleerden dat organisaties geneigd zijn misbruik te maken van deze kwetsbare groep flexwerkers door economische logica te volgen in plaats van welzijnslogica.

5.3.2 Paradox 2: standaardisatie versus maatwerk

De tweede paradox die naar voren kwam heeft betrekking op de loopbaanondersteuning voor flexwerkers. Uitzendorganisaties bieden loopbaanondersteuning aan flexwerkers in de vorm van scholing. Echter, flexwerkers vinden dat niet altijd relevant voor hen. Uitzendorganisaties percipiëren dit vervolgens vaak als een gebrek aan motivatie bij flexwerkers. Het volgende citaat uit de vragenlijst van een manager die bij een uitzendorganisatie leiding geeft aan teams die gespecialiseerd zijn in het werven, bemiddelen, begeleiding en ontwikkelen van kwetsbare uitzendkrachten – illustreert dit:

> "Verder zien we dat door een onzekere situatie van uitzendkrachten er weinig tot geen ruimte is bij de uitzendkracht voor scholing. Dus er is dan wel aanbod aan hen, maar de bereidwilligheid daar gebruik van te maken is laag." [Expert 6]

De paradox die hier dus duidelijk naar voren komt, is dat er een gebrek aan afstemming is tussen aanbod en behoefte. Meer specifiek, om de grote groepen diverse flexwerkers te kunnen ondersteunen is er een bepaalde mate van standaardisering nodig voor uitzendorganisaties. Tegelijkertijd ervaren flexwerkers die gestandaardiseerde activiteiten vaak als niet passend voor hun specifieke context en type flexwerk. Tijdens de bijeenkomst kwam aan de orde dat organisaties en beleidsmakers erkennen dat er sprake is van enige heterogeniteit. Ze maken daarbij onderscheid tussen flexwerkers naar contractvorm, te weten zzp'ers, oproepkrachten, uitzendkrachten en kluswerkers. Dit onderscheid is echter niet genoeg om de ondersteuning te bieden die aansluit bij de specifieke behoeften van diegenen die ondersteuning nodig hebben. De andere kant van de paradox is dat volledig maatwerk onrealistisch is voor organisaties en dat ze altijd met enige vorm van standaardisering zullen moeten werken qua aanbod van training en ontwikkeling om de haalbaarheid te garanderen.

5.3.3 Paradox 3: moderne werkvormen versus traditionele wet- en regelgeving

In het lab kwam nog een derde paradox naar voren: enerzijds is iedereen zich bewust van de groeiende flexibilisering en de komst van allerlei niet-traditionele werkvormen. Anderzijds blijft het traditionele denken nog prominent aanwezig in de acties die worden genomen ter ondersteuning. Een platformeigenaar die ook zelf al jaren als kluswerker in de kluseconomie werkt merkte bijvoorbeeld op:

> "Fiscale en juridische wetgeving en verzekeringstechnische mogelijkheden. Ten goede of ten slechte, maar de populariteit van flexwerken en platformwerk heeft laten zien dat er een vraag is in Nederland naar een nieuwe manier van werken. Een manier van werken waar je zelf op flexibele wijze meer invulling aan je werk en je loopbaan kunt geven. Helaas lijkt er vanuit vakbonden en de politiek een drang om te blijven in de hokjesgeest van iemand die of honderd procent typisch werknemer is, of honderd procent typisch ondernemer. Zzp'ers, flexwerkers en platformwerkers willen graag een betere invulling aan hun werk en hun leven kunnen geven, maar anno 2022 word je nog steeds gevraagd waarom je niet gewoon in loondienst gaat." [Expert 21]

Uit dit citaat blijkt dat flexwerk wordt beschouwd in relatie tot de norm van vast werk bij één werkgever. Dit citaat is een voorbeeld van wat meerdere belanghebbenden ervaarden als een paradox van modern vs. traditioneel 'denken en doen' rondom flexwerkers. Enerzijds is er een duidelijke maatschappelijke behoefte aan flexibele krachten die snel ingezet kunnen worden om problemen op te lossen. Anderzijds worden zij vanuit wet- en regelgeving vaak nog vanuit een traditioneel perspectief beschouwd als 'niet-standaard werkers'. De nieuwe vormen van werk worden bovendien niet gelijk gewaardeerd. Zo ontbreken concrete maatregelen om hen te ondersteunen in hun werk en loopbaan. Deelnemende beleidsmedewerkers gaven aan dat het grootste obstakel is dat het huidige sociale zekerheidsstelsel is geschoeid op een werknemerscontract. In deze zin is flexwerk dus nadelig voor flexwerkers in termen van sociale zekerheid. Zo wijzen praktijkmensen er vaak op dat in het huidige stelsel werknemer zijn – in plaats van flexwerker – het beste is voor een duurzame loopbaan. De traditionele wet- en regelgeving werkt zwart-witdenken in de hand, en houdt dus het risico in dat men een verdere tweedeling tussen vaste werkers en flexwerkers aanwakkert. Bovendien benadrukten deelnemers aan het evenement dat flexwerkers vaak stigmatisering ervaren, omdat ze worden buitengesloten van sociale activiteiten op de werkplek en geen mogelijkheden hebben voor loopbaanontwikkeling in de organisatie.

5.4 Wetenschappelijke reflectie van status quo naar wenselijke toekomst: connectie van paradoxen met het raamwerk van duurzame loopbanen

Met bovenstaande paradoxen als status quo gebruiken we in deze paragraaf het raamwerk van duurzame loopbanen (De Vos et al., 2020) om de beperkingen van de status quo te doorbreken en uit te zoomen naar een alternatieve toekomst. Dit is een belangrijke stap waarbij de paradoxen in een breder perspectief worden geplaatst om van daaruit de derde stap te nemen naar concrete aanbevelingen. Het doel is niet om de theorie te gebruiken om de meest waarschijnlijke toekomst te voorspellen, maar om de meest wenselijke toekomst voor te stellen (Gümüsay & Reinecke, 2022). De specifieke alternatieve toekomst waar we naar kijken, is de toekomst die wenselijk is vanuit het raamwerk van duurzame loopbanen: een raamwerk waarin flexwerkers een context genieten, en het leiderschap ontvangen, die hen in staat stellen om een duurzame loopbaan te ervaren.

5.4.1 Paradox 1 en bestemming 1: productiviteit, gezondheid en geluk

Het model van duurzame loopbanen beschrijft de eerste paradox (economische vs. welzijnslogica) als aandacht voor enerzijds productiviteit en anderzijds geluk en gezondheid (De Vos et al., 2020). Bemiddelaars op de arbeidsmarkt en klantorganisaties kijken, volgens de deelnemers aan ons lab, echter nauwelijks naar de geluks- en gezondheidsindicatoren in de loopbanen van flexwerkers. Zo kwam tijdens het event naar voren dat de meeste organisaties momenteel niet nadenken over welke maatregelen ze kunnen nemen om het geluk en welzijn van flexwerkers te waarborgen. Ook productiviteit is niet altijd gewaarborgd, aangezien flexwerkers mogelijk minder vaardigheidstraining krijgen of minder worden ingezet voor werk dat het beste bij hen past in vergelijking met vaste werknemers (Standing, 2016). Toch benadrukt het model van duurzame loopbanen dat gezondheid, geluk en productiviteit de hoofdindicatoren zijn voor de duurzaamheid van loopbanen (De Vos et al., 2020). Meer in het bijzonder zouden deze drie aspecten gedurende de gehele loopbaan van mensen in bepaalde mate en in onderlinge balans gewaarborgd moeten worden. Door het huidige overwicht van de economische versus de welzijnslogica zijn de geluks- en gezondheidsaspecten voor de duurzaamheid van loopbanen van flexwerkers echter onderontwikkeld. Daar staat tegenover dat organisaties niet enkel een welzijnslogica kunnen volgen, aangezien de economische logica rondom het optimaal functioneren van de organisatie ook cruciaal is (Van de Voorde et al., 2012).

Wat de eerste paradox vooral zo belangrijk maakt in de context van flexwerkers is dat welzijnslogica minder voor de hand ligt door de kortere-termijn en lossere arbeidsrelatie die bestaat tussen de (tijdelijke) organisaties en de flexwerker. Vanuit klassiek strategisch HRM gedachtegoed is de return on investment van bijvoorbeeld investeringen in hun ontwikkeling minder evident (Lepak & Snell, 1999). Organisaties hebben in de huidige tijden van flexibilisering en snelle verandering (bijv. de energietransitie) echter ook behoefte aan snel inzetbare en flexibele krachten (Kalleberg et al., 2003; Rouvroye et al., 2022), waarbij flexwerkers vaak een passende oplossing zijn (Connelly & Gallagher, 2004a). Het is dus ook in het belang van organisaties dat er voldoende aanbod is van flexwerkers is die gezond, gelukkig en productief kunnen werken, en daarmee een duurzame loopbaan kunnen ervaren. Om de loopbanen van flexwerkers duurzamer te maken zal een betere balans tussen een economische en een welzijnslogica nodig zijn, waarbij aandacht is voor een goede balans tussen geluk, gezondheid en productiviteit op de korte én lange termijn.

5.4.2 Paradox 2 en bestemming 2: persoon en context in samenspel

Het raamwerk van duurzame loopbanen ziet de tweede paradox (standaardisatie vs. maatwerk) als een kwestie van rekening houden met de context en de persoon en hun onderlinge wisselwerking (De Vos et al., 2020). Bovendien benadrukt het raamwerk de idiosyncratische aard van duurzame loopbanen: wat voor de een duurzaam is, hoeft dat voor een ander niet te zijn. Organisaties en beleidsmakers zien volgens onze bevindingen echter de wisselwerking tussen persoon en context over het hoofd. In het bijzonder kiezen sommige werkers gedwongen en anderen bewust voor flexwerk, waardoor ze al dan niet vrijwillig terechtkomen in flexcontracten (De Jong et al., 2009). Bovendien is er veel variatie binnen de groep flexwerkers. Zo zijn er binnen de platformeconomie migranten werkzaam die maaltijden bezorgen en compleet afhankelijk zijn van het platform voor hun inkomen, maar ook theoretisch geschoolde professionals die zeer gewild zijn om hun unieke expertise en daarmee juist veelal financieel onafhankelijk zijn. Als gevolg daarvan hebben flexwerkers verschillende psychologische ervaringen en behoeften (Keith et al., 2019), waardoor ze verschillende ondersteuning nodig hebben zelfs binnen een en dezelfde contractvorm. Er heerst dus een spanning tussen generieke interventies en idiosyncratische loopbaanbehoeften en paden.

Leidinggevenden gebruiken meestal een objectieve benadering om training en ondersteuning vorm te geven. Dat wil zeggen, ze kijken naar objectieve informatie, meestal contractvormen, om loopbaanondersteuning en -beleid uit te werken. Uit onze gesprekken tijdens het evenement blijkt dat het niet louter de contractvorm is die bepalend is voor hoe (duurzaam) flexwerkers hun loopbanen ervaren. Zo is het ‘gedwongen’ versus ‘bewuste’ karakter van flexwerken een subjectieve vorm van informatie die erg bepalend is voor hoe men flexwerk psychologisch ervaart. Een subjectieve benadering betrekt zulke informatie bij de ontwikkeling van loopbaanondersteuning. Denk bijvoorbeeld aan een 30-jarige gedwongen uitzendkracht die met flexwerk een gezin moet onderhouden. En denk vervolgens aan een bewuste uitzendkracht van achter in de vijftig, die dertig jaar in vaste dienst heeft gewerkt en zich nu niet meer langdurig aan een organisatie wil binden. Beide flexwerkers bevinden zich in dezelfde flexwerkcontext (objectieve benadering), maar hebben door hun gedwongen of bewuste keuze (subjectieve benadering) verschillende behoeften (Kroon et al., 2022). Zo heeft de gedwongen flexwerker behoefte aan inkomenszekerheid, terwijl de bewuste flexwerker behoefte heeft aan autonomie. De duurzaamheid van hun loopbaan is dus afhankelijk van andere factoren dan enkel contractvorm, zoals hun loopbaanfase en levensomstandigheden.

5.4.3 Paradox 3 en bestemming 3: een ondersteunende context tijdens de gehele loopbaan

Het raamwerk van duurzame loopbanen legt met de tijdsdimensie de nadruk op het verloop van loopbanen, in plaats van enkel op de huidige baan. Het is daarbij essentieel dat hulpbronnen niet na verloop van tijd uitgeput raken, maar dat geluk, gezondheid en productiviteit gedurende de hele loopbaan gewaarborgd blijven. De tijdsdimensie in het model van duurzame loopbanen werkt ook in samenhang met de contextdimensie. Concreet betekent dit dat bijvoorbeeld de ervaring van werk door de tijd heen wordt gevormd door de context van sociale zekerheid (Montebovi, 2021). Flexwerk wordt echter vaak door actoren in de context gezien als baan in plaats van loopbaan (Retkowsky et al., 2020). Echter, door die exclusieve focus op iemands huidige rol (bijv. de werksituatie van een uitzendkracht bij de huidige tijdelijke werkgever), krijgt het waarborgen van iemands loopbaan duurzaamheid op langere termijn (bijv. de opeenstapeling van ervaringen van diezelfde uitzendkracht bij meerdere tijdelijke werkgevers) . Het duurzame loopbaanperspectief ziet flexwerk wel als deel van een loopbaan (Retkowsky et al., 2023a). Vanuit dit perspectief is het ook vanzelfsprekend dat flexwerkers net zo veel sociale zekerheid opbouwen als andere werkenden. Het duurzame loopbaanperspectief stelt voor om werkzekerheid en sociale zekerheid rond een loopbaan te organiseren, en niet rond een baan. Het is dus belangrijk dat beleidsmakers een juridisch kader scheppen waarin ook ruimte is voor individuele loopbanen over grenzen van organisaties en contracten heen.

5.5 Aanbevelingen voor routes naar een wenselijke duurzame toekomst voor flexwerkers

In paragraaf 3 bespraken we de huidige status quo aan de hand van drie paradoxen die voortkwamen uit onze data. Vervolgens bespraken we in paragraaf 4 hoe deze paradoxen vanuit een duurzame loopbaanperspectief mogelijk kunnen leiden tot gewenste toekomstscenario's. In deze paragraaf maken we de laatste stap, namelijk het inpassen van de actieplannen die naar voren kwamen tijdens het lab, om routes uit te stippelen richting die toekomstscenario's. We behandelen zowel het opschalen van bestaande alternatieven als nieuwe hypothetische alternatieven (Gümüsay & Reinecke, 2022). Beide vormen kwamen in het lab ter sprake.

5.5.1 Routes van paradox 1 naar bestemming 1: werk samen met overheden en bevorder goed werkgeverschap

HR-beleidsmedewerkers bij uitzendbureaus, platformen of werkgevers die met tijdelijke contracten werken, slagen er vaak niet in om af te stappen van hun 'puur' economische logica bij het ontwikkelen van een flexibel personeelsbeleid. Externe prikkels en aanvullende middelen kunnen daarom nuttig zijn om leiders weg te laten bewegen van een dominante economische logica. Wanneer leiders werken met flexwerkers moeten ze leren te navigeren tussen verschillende spanningsvelden, omdat verschillende partijen er vaak ook een andere logica op na houden. Een balans zoeken tussen deze soorten logica is cruciaal om effectief leiding te geven aan flexwerkers en te werken aan duurzame loopbanen. Door samen te werken met overheden kan er bijvoorbeeld meer nadruk worden gelegd op de welzijnslogica. Samenwerkingsrelaties met stichtingen met overheidssteun zijn hierbij veelbelovend. Een voorbeeld hiervan is een 'alles-in-één-traject' waarin een financiële coach, lifestyle coach of inzetbaarheidstrainer helpt om het evenwicht terug te brengen tussen geluk, gezondheid, en productiviteit in de loopbaan van flexwerkers (Doorzaam, 2021). Op deze manier wordt de welzijnslogica dominanter in het debat en kan er een betere balans ontstaan tussen economische en welzijnsgerelateerde argumenten. Een concrete suggestie is dus om ondersteunende structuren in te voeren die de machtsongelijkheid tussen flexwerkers en organisaties kunnen tegengaan. Beleidsmakers bij de overheid zouden hierin een leidende rol kunnen vervullen door actief input op te halen bij werkgevers, platformen en flexwerkers zelf, om deze vervolgens te kunnen gebruiken voor (nieuw) beleid.

Naast samenwerkingsrelaties met overheden adviseren we arbeidsmarktorganisaties en platformen om een rolmodel te worden op het gebied van 'goed werkgeverschap'. Goed werkgeverschap is een aandachtspunt voor organisaties die met flexwerkers werken. Om leiderschap hierin te stimuleren, kan het bijvoorbeeld nuttig zijn om een index te ontwikkelen die helpt te beoordelen in welke mate organisaties duurzame loopbanen creëren voor hun flexwerkers. Idealiter worden deze criteria samen met flexwerkers ontwikkeld om ervoor te zorgen dat de index aansluit bij wat ze nodig hebben in hun werk en loopbaan. Een jaarlijkse externe audit zou dan kunnen laten zien welke organisaties het goed doen en welke organisaties verbetering behoeven. Het geeft ook stimulans voor organisaties om op een openbare ranglijst te zien hoe de eigen organisatie vooruit gaat en hoe ze het doet ten opzichte van de concurrentie. Dit geeft leiders een kans om het belang van zulke ontwikkelingen te verantwoorden. Verder geeft het leiders de handvatten voor het formuleren van verbeterpunten. We merkten in onze gesprekken tijdens het evenement dat organisaties niet goed weten wat ze concreet kunnen doen om duurzame loopbanen te stimuleren. Een index met criteria en voorbeelden van 'best practices' zou organisaties kunnen helpen bij het ondernemen van concrete acties. Wanneer duidelijk is welke praktijken duurzaamheid kunnen verhogen, kunnen leiders hier meer gaan op inzetten.

Zo heeft de universiteit van Oxford de Fairwork-index ontwikkeld om de arbeidsomstandigheden die online werkplatformen bieden te beoordelen. Fairwork hanteert een puntensysteem voor platformen wereldwijd (maximumscore is 10). De score wordt bepaald aan de hand van de vijf principes van Fairwork: eerlijke beloning, eerlijke omstandigheden, eerlijke contracten, eerlijk management, eerlijke vertegenwoordiging (Heeks et al., 2021). Naar aanleiding van deze index hebben sommige platformen hun arbeidsomstandigheden gewijzigd, bijvoorbeeld door nu een eerlijker loon te bieden. Aangezien de Fairwork-index zich richt op arbeidsomstandigheden van specifiek de platformeconomie, zou het nuttig zijn om voor alle soorten flexwerk een index te ontwikkelen die gericht is op duurzame loopbaanontwikkeling voor flexwerkers. De recente stap naar certificering van uitzendwerk in Nederland (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2022) is een soortgelijke stap, maar dat is meer een ondergrens, terwijl een index meer zou gaan om het tonen van de beste voorbeelden. Werkgevers en platformen zouden hierin nadrukkelijk een leidende rol kunnen nemen.

5.5.2 Routes van paradox 2 naar bestemming 2: omarm de voordelen van HRM op maat

De uitdaging voor leidinggevenden is om een evenwicht te vinden tussen het bieden van brede ondersteuning die voor een grotere groep werkt (bijv. alle uitzendkrachten) en het bieden van maatwerk dat recht doet aan specifieke (psychologische) behoeften die context- of persoonsspecifiek kunnen zijn. Het gaat hierbij dus om het zoeken naar een evenwicht tussen standaardisatie en maatwerk. Daarin heeft standaardisatie het voordeel dat het goedkoper is dan maatwerk. Maatwerk doet dan weer meer recht aan persoonlijke ervaringen. Leiders moeten deze psychologische ervaringen meenemen, willen ze begrijpen welke acties ze kunnen nemen om tot meer loopbaanduurzaamheid te komen. Het is nuttig de objectieve (d.w.z., contractvorm) en subjectieve benadering (d.w.z., de psychologische ervaringen zoals gedwongen flexwerk) te combineren om de heterogene groep flexwerkers meer aan te spreken. Vooral vanuit de wetenschappelijke deelnemers van het lab werden hierover actieplannen naar voren gebracht, en verschillende belanghebbenden gaven aan hierop te willen doorpakken. Specifiek, dienend leiderschap (Eva et al., 2019) of andere vormen van leiderschap die nadrukkelijk vertrekken vanuit de behoefte van de flexwerkers, zowel van bemiddelaars op de arbeidsmarkt als van beleidsmakers, kan hier een bijdrage aan leveren. Door de behoeften van flexwerkers te peilen (bijv. in termen van training, autonomie en i-deals) (Van Merweland et al., 2022), en hen dus ook actief te betrekken als stakeholders, kan men binnen de grenzen van het mogelijke toch enig maatwerk bieden. Ondanks het feit dat HR in de context van flexwerk veelal een andere en niet vanzelfsprekende vorm aanneemt dan in de klassieke organisatie (zie bijv. Meijerink & Keegan, 2019), zien we ook hier een belangrijke rol weggelegd voor (duurzaam) HRM beleid (zie bijv. Ehnert, 2014; Peters, 2021). HR professionals kunnen hierin dus bij uitstek een leidende rol nemen. Zij zijn immers de verbindende partij tussen de lijn en de flexwerker. Beleid dat een balans kan vinden tussen relatief efficiënte standaardmaatregelen en complexere maatwerkinterventies zou een betekenisvolle bijdrage kunnen leveren aan de duurzaamheid van loopbanen van flexwerkers. Op dit punt haakt deze route ook aan bij de discussie in de literatuur rondom duurzaam HRM, waarbij gesproken wordt over het omgaan met paradoxen die vergelijkbaar zijn met de paradoxen die wij geschetst hebben in dit artikel. HRM zou dus bijvoorbeeld de leiding kunnen nemen in het versterken van de inzetbaarheid van flexwerkers (zie bijv. Peters & Lam, 2015).

5.5.3 Routes van paradox 3 naar bestemming 3: bouw een inclusief sociaal zekerheidsstelsel en faciliteer loopbaan transities voor flexwerkers

Het zwart-witdenken over flexwerk versus vast werk kan worden vermeden door één juridisch kader te ontwikkelen dat losstaat van het arbeidscontract (Behrendt et al., 2019; Ten Hoonte, 2022). Dat betekent betere sociale zekerheid bieden voor meer soorten arbeidscontracten. Zekic (2023) haalt aan dat dit broodnodig is, aangezien de verdere versoepeling van regelgeving voor flexwerk de afgelopen decennia de ongunstige situatie van flexwerkers, in vergelijking met vaste werknemers, verder heeft versterkt (bijv. ongelijke bescherming en behandeling). We pleiten er daarom voor dat beleidsmakers leiderschap tonen in het vernieuwen van het sociale zekerheidsstelsel (vgl. Van der Neut & Poelstra, 2017; Rözer et al., 2021) in de richting van een stelsel dat sociale zekerheid biedt aan alle typen werkenden. De kosten van organisaties voor het inhuren van flexwerkers zouden gelijkgetrokken moeten worden met de kosten voor vaste werkers (Fisher & Connelly, 2017), door ook sociale lasten voor flexwerkers in te voeren. Dit zou de kunstmatige barrière wegnemen om werkenden in vaste dienst te nemen, of zelfs de huidige sterke wens van veel flexwerkers wegnemen om in vaste dienst te komen. Maar dit betekent ook dat flexwerkers duurder zullen worden omdat organisaties bijvoorbeeld een verplichte arbeidsongeschiktheidsverzekering moeten gaan betalen. Het effect is dat de kosten voor werkgevers vergelijkbaarder worden, onafhankelijk van hoe flex of vast de baan is, waardoor waarschijnlijk de keuze voor flexwerk of vast werk minder op alleen economische gronden zal worden gemaakt. In plaats van te praten over de vraag of het al dan niet mogelijk is om duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers te ontwikkelen, zouden we moeten praten over welke stappen we kunnen zetten om tot loopbaanduurzaamheid te komen voor iedereen. Daarbij is het van belang om over grenzen van organisaties heen te kijken, omdat veel flexwerkers tussen de grenzen van organisaties vallen.

We merkten tijdens het event dat flexwerkers een centraal punt voor kennisontwikkeling en -uitwisseling missen. Een formeel, publiek ingesteld punt zou organisaties en beleidsmakers kunnen helpen bij het uitwerken en uitvoeren van acties die duurzame loopbanen kunnen stimuleren via een actieve en doorlopende dialoog. Hoewel organisaties aangeven niet goed te weten hoe ze duurzame loopbanen kunnen vormgeven, vragen ze echter nauwelijks input aan flexwerkers zelf. Hier zit een nadrukkelijke kans voor zowel werkgevers als flexwerkers zelf om leiding te tonen in de discussie over duurzame loopbanen. Praktisch gezien zou het dus een concrete stap vooruit zijn als de diverse groep flexwerkexperts (waaronder flexwerkers zelf) regelmatig bijeen zou komen om duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers te bespreken. Zo heeft werknemersorganisatie FNV een dergelijk platform in het leven geroepen, al is het onderliggende impliciete raamwerk hier veelal gestoeld op duurzame loopbanen voor vaste werknemers (Gundt, 2019), in plaats van een organisatie die start vanuit een flexwerkfilosofie.

Hoewel de discussies over sociale zekerheid belangrijk zijn, is het ook essentieel om te stimuleren dat flexwerkers makkelijk en snel nieuw werk vinden. Met doorlopend flexwerk is er geen werkloosheidsuitkering nodig, want dit kan worden opgevangen door het hebben van inkomen uit doorlopend nieuw flexwerk. Naast vernieuwing van het sociale zekerheidsstelsel, dat idealiter losstaat van arbeidscontractvormen, is het dus belangrijk om andere belanghebbenden (naast de beleidsmakers) in het flexwerkveld te stimuleren om leiderschap te tonen door flexwerkers tussen twee banen in te ondersteunen. Een voorbeeld van leiderschap op dit vlak is klusCV (Arets, 2022), die kluswerkers in staat stelt om hun overdraagbaar menselijk kapitaal vast te leggen en ze zo de onderhandelingsmacht te geven om te wisselen tussen platformen (Lens & Oslejová, 2018). Dit soort innovaties past ook bij uitstek bij een duurzame loopbaanperspectief omdat de productiviteit, geluk en gezondheid van flexwerkers op de lange termijn gevormd wordt door de opeenvolging van werkervaringen en klussen. Dit maakt het cruciaal om juist de verbindingen daartussen te versterken.

5.6 Discussie

Dit artikel gaat in op leiderschap bij het opzetten van loopbaanondersteuning voor flexwerkers. Daarbij kiezen we voor een benadering van leiderschap uitgevoerd door meerdere belanghebbenden. Tabel 5.2 geeft een overzicht van de paradoxen (paragraaf 3), wenselijke toekomstscenario's (paragraaf 4) en de routes daarnaartoe via effectief leiderschap (paragraaf 5).

Dit artikel heeft twee contributies aan de wetenschappelijke literatuur. Ten eerste leveren we een bijdrage aan de literatuur over leiderschap (Schneider, 2002) door te bespreken hoe leiderschap in tijden van flexibilisering verschillende paradoxen met zich meebrengt. De paradoxen die we besproken hebben zijn soms terug te brengen tot tegenstrijdigheden tussen (de logica van) verschillende belanghebbenden. De routes laten zien dat het overstijgen van die tegenstrijdigheden een uitkomst is in de context van complex leiderschap wanneer er verschillende belanghebbenden betrokken zijn. Het beschrijven van deze paradoxen helpt om inzicht te krijgen in wat er nodig is om duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers te ondersteunen. Onze bevindingen maken bovendien duidelijk dat flexwerkers zelf een belangrijke belanghebbende zijn, want we zien dat bij elk paradox de oplossing schuilt in het meer centraal stellen van de flexwerker. Daarom pleiten we bij het stimuleren van duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers voor leiderschap waarbij meerdere belanghebbenden een rol

Tabel 5.2 Overzicht van paragrafen 3-5

Paradoxen	**Toekomstscenario's op basis van duurzame loopbanenraamwerk**	**Routes via effectief leiderschap**
Economische versus welzijnslogica	Geluk, gezondheid en productiviteit (indicatoren voor duurzame loopbanen)	Leiderschap gericht op het bevorderen van welzijn
Standaardisatie versus maatwerk	Wisselwerking tussen persoon en context (dimensies van duurzame loopbanen)	Leiderschap met oog voor uiteenlopende behoeften
Moderne werkvormen versus traditionele wet- en regelgeving	Tijd (dimensie van duurzame loopbanen)	Leiderschap gericht op het scheppen van één juridisch kader over grenzen van organisaties heen

spelen (Schneider, 2002), onder wie de flexwerkers zelf, bij het bedenken en voorstellen van oplossingen. De door ons voorgestelde benadering met meerdere belanghebbenden gaat dan ook niet alleen over de inhoud, maar ook over het proces van beleidsvorming door organisaties en instellingen. Door deze bijdrage aan leiderschap dragen we indirect bij aan theorievorming op het gebied van flexwerk (Bonet et al., 2013; Spreitzer et al., 2017) door uitwerking te geven aan de *management challenge* (Connelly & Gallagher, 2004, p. 146) met betrekking tot flexwerkers. Onze bevindingen pleiten voor een genuanceerdere kijk op deze managementuitdaging, waarbij rekening wordt gehouden met flexwerkers. De managementuitdaging is niet uitsluitend de verantwoordelijkheid van één organisatie, maar vraagt om een gedeelde verantwoordelijkheid tussen flexwerkers, organisaties die met flexwerkers werken en deze inhuren, en instellingen zoals externe arbeidsmarktpartijen, bijvoorbeeld stichtingen en de overheid.

Ten tweede dragen we bij aan de literatuur over duurzame loopbanen (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden et al., 2020) door empirische inzichten te bieden in hoe leiders het voortouw kunnen nemen op weg naar duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers. Het kader voor duurzame loopbanen beschouwt duurzame loopbanen als een proces waarbij het individu eigenaarschap neemt en daarbij voortdurend interacteert met de context en ontwikkelingen over de tijd. Onze bevindingen gaan dieper in op deze context door een reeks uiteenlopende belanghebbenden binnen de flexcontext te bevragen. Hoewel we daarbij primair een overkoepelend perspectief gebruiken van leiderschap dat alle belanghebbenden kunnen tonen, geven we ook diverse voorbeelden van meer specifiek leiderschap rondom duurzame loopbanen van flexwerkers. Zo betogen we dat beleidsmakers actief leiderschap kunnen tonen door meer de verbinding aan te gaan met werkgevers, platformen, uitzendbureaus en de ervaringen van flexwerkers zelf. Ook moedigen we werkgevers en platformen aan om indicatoren te ontwikkelen waarmee inschattingen en vergelijkingen gemaakt kunnen worden op het gebied van goed werkgeverschap. HRM heeft bovendien een cruciale leidende rol in het ontwikkelen van HR beleid dat een balans vindt tussen standaardaanpakken en maatwerk.

Aangezien flexwerkers actief zijn in een veranderlijke loopbaanomgeving buiten de grenzen van organisaties, is het nuttig om de loopbaan van flexwerkers te begrijpen binnen een ecosysteem (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). Baruch en Rousseau (2019, p. 18) omschrijven het loopbaanecosysteem als "een sociaal stelsel van werkgelegenheid en loopbaangerelateerde ontwikkeling en kansen dat voortkomt uit de onderlinge afhankelijkheid van actoren of entiteiten, waaronder individuen, netwerken, bedrijven en sociale instellingen". Bovenal zijn flexwerkers, organisaties en instellingen van elkaar afhankelijk, en alleen samen kunnen ze duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers scheppen. In het ecosysteem van flexwerk is er sprake van spanningen die tot op zekere hoogte verschillende belangen van verschillende belanghebbenden vertegenwoordigen. Zo zou de overheid graag zien dat organisaties zelf iets doen om loopbanen van flexwerkers te ondersteunen (dus vanuit een morele drijfveer), terwijl organisaties hun gedrag vaak pas veranderen als ze daartoe worden gedwongen (bijv. door wetgeving). Hier schuilt een risico dat er te weinig gebeurt omdat de verantwoordelijkheid niet altijd helder is. Leiderschap betekent in dit geval dus ook verantwoordelijkheid pakken en niet enkel afwachten. Het succesvol stimuleren van duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers is daarmee een kwestie van laveren tussen de belangen van verschillende belanghebbenden in het loopbaanecosysteem.

Tot slot bespreken we enkele beperkingen van dit onderzoek. Een limitatie van onze aanpak is dat we slechts twee flexwerkers betrokken hadden bij het lab, terwijl we in dit artikel vaak opgeroepen hebben tot het meer actief betrekken van flexwerkers. Dit lijkt wellicht tegenstrijdig. Echter, zoals in de methoden benoemd, vormt deze studie een onderdeel van een groter project over duurzame loopbanen bij flexwerkers. In de andere deelstudies hebben de onderzoekers verschillende flexwerkers geïnterviewd (Retkowsky et al., 2023b) en die inzichten hebben de onderzoekers geholpen om het evenement mee vorm te geven en zo ook tot de bevindingen in deze studie te komen. Een andere limitatie is dat ons lab eenmalig was. Onze aanbevelingen voor onderzoekers is dan ook om een meer geïnstitutionaliseerde aanpak te kiezen zoals een task force (Gümüsay, 2023), waarin het niet aan de onderzoekers is om de vervolgstappen te interpreteren, maar waar die vervolgstappen samen worden gecreëerd. Bovendien is het belangrijk om een grote en diverse groep flexwerkers daarbij te betrekken. Kortom, om écht bij te dragen is er niet alleen theoretisch, maar ook meer actiegericht onderzoek nodig waarbij de verschillende belanghebbenden samen kennis creëren (Gümüsay, 2023).

5.7 Conclusie

Als we kijken naar de drie paradoxen met betrekking tot het stimuleren van duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers, is het belangrijk om alle belanghebbenden bij deze discussie te betrekken. We hebben zelf ervaren dat het lastig is om deze verschillende perspectieven en belangen op één lijn te krijgen. Toch is een dergelijke holistische benadering noodzakelijk om duurzame loopbanen voor flexwerkers te scheppen en tot meer effectief leiderschap van flexwerk te komen. We hopen dat dit artikel verdere belangstelling wekt en dat onderzoekers en praktijkmensen met elkaar in gesprek blijven gaan om een betere en duurzamere toekomst voor flexwerkers te stimuleren.

Praktijkbox

Wat betekenen de resultaten voor de praktijk?

- Bemiddelaars op de arbeidsmarkt en klantorganisaties kijken nauwelijks naar de geluks- en gezondheidsindicatoren in de loopbanen van flexwerkers en zouden meer leiderschap moeten tonen in het bevorderen van welzijn.
- HR managers bij platformen, uitzendorganisaties, klantorganisaties en externe opleidingspartijen zouden meer maatwerk kunnen leveren door rekening te houden met uiteenlopende behoeften van flexwerkers.
- Om tot vernieuwingen te komen, raden we beleidsmakers aan beleid te ontwikkelen met flexwerkers, en niet alleen over flexwerkers: Organisaties en beleidsmakers pleiten vaak voor beleidsaanpassingen gebaseerd op de misplaatste opvatting dat flexwerk een tussenstation is naar een standaard werknemersrol in plaats van beleid dat flexwerk faciliteert.
- Beleidsmakers wordt aangeraden één juridisch kader te ontwikkelen, over grenzen van organisaties heen, om een betere sociale zekerheid te creëren voor flexwerkers

Chapter 6

Discussion

6.1 Main research findings

I started this dissertation by arguing how the nontraditional work field misses a career perspective. That is, most research has focused on nontraditional workers' work experiences while they are employed at one organization. Furthermore, I argued that most research on nontraditional workers has failed to integrate context into theorizing that accurately represents the lived experiences of nontraditional workers. To address these limitations, I adopted a sustainable career perspective (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015), seeking to enrich the understanding of nontraditional workers' lived career experiences. *Chapters 2–5* present this dissertation's individual papers with their findings and specific discussions (see Table 6.1 for an overview of key findings). Thereafter, I draw on all those key findings to answer this dissertation's sub-research questions.

I also identified two sub-questions that connect the four individual papers: a) *How can we advance knowledge of nontraditional workers by theorizing on their lived experiences?* and b) *How do person, context, and time interact in shaping nontraditional workers' career experiences?* In the following, I will address my findings in light of these sub-questions.

Table 6.1 Research questions and key findings per chapter

Chapter	Research question	Key findings
2	*How has nontraditional work research literature developed and how can we build on it?*	We find that nontraditional work has been studied mostly while workers are working at one organization. To address this issue, we conceptualize a sustainable career perspective that allows for integrating the prior literature and identifying new areas for research. Drawing on a sustainable career perspective facilitates the study of nontraditional work from a dynamic perspective extending beyond one single organization.
3	*How do agency temps self-manage their careers?*	The precarious career environment shaped agency temps' career self-management. We find that agency temps' career self-management is short-term-oriented and primarily reactive. They have survival and stability as career goals. Further, agency temps enact four career behaviors: (1) moonlighting, (2) self-profiling, (3) compensatory career behavior, and (4) job search behavior. We discovered two negative long-term results of these career behaviors: (1) being locked-in and (2) experiencing resource loss during unemployment.
4	*How do social exchanges unfold in the context of platform-mediated work?*	We find that gig workers perceive poor treatment by the platforms. This poor treatment caused three distinct social exchange mechanisms: Self-oriented reciprocity (reaction toward platform), de-socializing social exchanges (triadic reciprocity), and repairing social exchanges (triadic inverted reciprocity). Depending on the mechanism, different social exchanges developed. In particular, via self-oriented reciprocity and de-socializing the social exchanges, low-quality social exchanges develop. In contrast, via repairing social exchanges, high-quality social exchanges can develop.
5	*How can stakeholders of nontraditional workers take the lead in building and supporting sustainable careers for nontraditional workers?*	We find that nontraditional workers' stakeholders experience paradoxes regarding supporting these workers. In particular, we identified the following 3 paradoxes: (1) economic versus well-being logic, (2) standardization versus customization, and (3) modern employment modes versus traditional laws and regulations. Following that, we position the paradoxes within in the sustainable career framework and delineate desired future scenarios. We propose implementable pathways for leaders to foster sustainable career paths for nontraditional workers.

6.1.1 Sub-research question 1: How can we advance knowledge of nontraditional workers by theorizing on their lived experiences?

To address the issue that most knowledge generated about nontraditional workers has been gained by drawing on contextualization of traditional IOP and OB concepts (see section 1.3), I sought to examine how we can advance knowledge of nontraditional workers by theorizing their lived experiences from a broader career perspective (*Chapter 2*), enacting agency temp work (*Chapter 3*), doing gig work (*Chapter 4*), and utilizing stakeholder insights (*Chapter 5*). Building on prior studies, in *Chapter 2*, I critically reviewed prior work to understand how we can advance the nontraditional work field. Based on that, I conceptualized a sustainable career perspective for nontraditional workers. I theorized that the lived career experiences of nonstandard workers are heterogeneous. To fully capture the lived experiences of nontraditional workers, unique contextual factors that shape their experiences are important to be identified and integrated into theorizing. For example, I found that the multiple stakeholders (e.g., platform, client manager) around the nontraditional worker are influencing the workers' lived experiences. Studies are also needed that go beyond comparing types of work and focus on one specific type of work.

By investigating one specific type of work, in *Chapter 3*, I showed the lived experiences of agency temps. In contrast to prior research (e.g., Aletraris, 2010; Wagenaar et al., 2012), I conceptualized the context agency temps are in (Lopes & Chambel, 2017; Marler et al., 2002). In this study, I theorized the context by staying close (via grounded theory) to the socially constructed realities of these distinct workers. I theorized the context as—what I found characterizing the context—precarity (Allan et al., 2021). Precarity was experienced when workers depended on the agency temp work to make a living. For example, this dependency was experienced when workers did not have a financial buffer (were dependent on the work to pay their monthly bills) and aspired to stable work, but did not manage to attain it. Furthermore, I theorized the career actions by these workers as a reactive form of career self-management. This means career self-management was more ad hoc and short-term oriented than previous theorization of career self-management (King, 2004; Sturges et al., 2008).

After investigating agency temp work in *Chapter 2*, in *Chapter 3*, I investigated another distinct type of nontraditional work, gig work. In contrast to previous studies (Keith et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2021), in this study, I theorized context. by staying as close as I could (via grounded theory) to the socially constructed realities of these distinct workers. Specifically, I theorized their context as poor treatment by the platform's governance. The gig workers' lived experiences directed me to look at the governance angle of the technology that was their work context. I theorized that they experienced this as an initiating action in their social relationship with the platform company, and they deemed this action as poor. Furthermore, I theorized the interactions among gig workers as social exchanges that reciprocated dehumanization or invertedly reciprocated humanization in a triadic way. In that way, this study theorizes more negative and triadic social relations than previous social exchange theory research on positive dyadic exchanges. Through this, my study on gig work develops theory that can be generalized to other contexts.

While *Chapters 3–4* showed how to theorize the context in connection to work and career experiences based on how workers' themselves constructed their reality, in *Chapter 5*, I theorized the context as paradoxes encountered by stakeholders of nontraditional workers. I found that stakeholders themselves experience paradoxes in their lived experiences when they try to support nontraditional workers. For instance, they often fell into productivity logic instead of safeguarding the well-being logic when they support nontraditional workers. As such, stakeholders need to engage in the paradoxes, instead of framing things as difficult decisions.

6.1.2 Sub-research question 2: How do person, context, and time shape the nontraditional workers' career experiences?

In *Chapter 2,* I critically reviewed the nontraditional work literature and argued it has focused on studying nontraditional workers at one organization. However, we need an in-depth understanding of career experiences across organizations, and using the person, context, and time interplay is a helpful contribution in this direction. I found that most studies in the nontraditional work literature, integrated only one or two components into their study design (e.g., person, context, or time). The interplay of person, context, and time was almost entirely understudied. Therefore, I propose four concepts that integrate the person, context, and time interplay: namely, flexicurity, person-career-fit, career shocks, and employability.

In *Chapter 3*, I dove into the person dimension by drawing on career self-management theory (King, 2004). I showed that nontraditional workers' career self-navigation was impacted by the precarity that shaped their career self-management. That is, the precarity was making their career self-management rather reactive. Further, over time these workers perceived themselves as locked-in in their agency temp work. It is difficult for these workers to autonomously gain agency in their career development. This study's insights highlight the value of integrating the person, context, and time interplay into building sustainable careers.

In *Chapter 4*, I explored the person and context interaction by drawing on social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). I found that nontraditional workers' experiences in the gig economy were impacted by poor treatment by their platforms. That is, the poor treatment led to self-centered reciprocity and triadic reciprocity. For example, some workers started to work for multiple platforms simultaneously; a very unusual career behavior. Being less dependent on one platform made their career more sustainable. Yet, this multi-apping' negatively impacted the other actors in the ecosystem such as restaurants or customers. Restaurant staff prepared food in time that turned cold because the rider was busy finishing a gig on another platform. Customers often had to wait much longer for the food to arrive than the app had initially shown when they ordered. Thus, the multi-apping that made a nontraditional worker's career more sustainable did negatively impact the other actors' experience.

In *Chapter 5*, I built on the insights of *Chapters 2, 3,* and *4*, by using these insights to co-create understanding with stakeholders about how to build sustainable careers. In this chapter the person, context, and time insights came together. I co-created ways in which stakeholders can provide a context that interacts constructively with the personal factors and experiences we found. For example, whereas in *Chapter 3* the agency temps felt they cannot fully control and navigate their career due to the precarity, in *Chapter 5* I engaged with stakeholders to move the context they create away from assuming proactive workers. In *Chapter 4* I found that some gig workers started their own platform with good treatment – a worker owned platform. This is a bold career move; a worker decides to take over the role that was previously performed by another stakeholder. This also shows the role that different stakeholders play. Further, *Chapter 2* I argued that the legal framework is an aspect of context that in its current form makes it difficult to connect flexible working arrangements over time into a sustainable career. The nontraditional workers I studied (agency workers, food riders) lack the social security traditional workers have—making it difficult to experience nontraditional work as sustainable in the long term. In *Chapter 5* I engaged with the stakeholders responsible for this context to brainstorm how to account for unique person, context, and time factors in the future of work.

6.2 Response to the overarching research question and implications

The above presented findings help to answer the main research question of the dissertation: *How can nontraditional workers develop sustainable careers?*

In *Chapter 2*, I found that the ways to build sustainable careers are idiosyncratic, while also recognizing the potential of systemic change. That is, nontraditional workers have unique career experiences due to personal-level factors and due to group-, organization- and institution-level factors.

Specifically, in the empirical study presented in *Chapter 3*, I focused on the person—the nontraditional workers themselves. I studied what nontraditional workers do themselves to build their careers. I learned their career self-management is more reactive than proactive (e.g., moonlighting, compensatory career behavior). Further, I found they enacted reciprocity toward the client organization via self-profiling, but it did not work. These agency temps tried hard via self-profiling to attain stable work with the client, yet did not attain it. Therefore, they felt they were not getting the reciprocity back. While in *Chapter 2* I noted that career resources are important to build a sustainable career, in *Chapter 3* I found why the nontraditional workers I studied could not build or sustain their career resources in the long run. I found that, over time, they felt locked-in in their agency temp work. Thus, these workers cannot build a sustainable career by themselves. They rely on the context for resources, but those resources are not accessible, because access requires proactive career behavior, and the context does not facilitate agency to engage in proactive career behavior. Furthermore, when these workers ask for support, the context does not reciprocate their efforts with resources that can build sustainable careers (e.g., a long-term contract). In contrast, most traditional workers do not experience the precarity that is so draining on career resources.

To complement the insights on the personal level, in *Chapter 4*, I studied more deeply the interactions between nontraditional workers and the organization. The workers enacted reciprocity via cancelling tactics. As with the agency temps, these gig workers felt the organization was not reciprocating their behavior. Over time, the reciprocity worsened and the gig workers became locked-in. For example, gig work did allow people without Dutch or English skills to get started in the labor market, but the platform did not offer support to help them transition to another job. Both agency temps and gig workers were often locked in. For some, the unsustainable part of gig workers' career plan (that gig work was intended to be only a temporary career step) became sustained for a long time ("sustained unsustainability"). However, I found there were also gig workers who broke the negative cycle and created upward reciprocity. These workers also remained gig workers but with more agency. Restaurants experienced less precarity and used that leeway to invest in positive reciprocity with the gig workers. Interestingly, these positive interactions gave career resources to these workers, thus improving their career sustainability. For example, gig workers experienced social support that acted as a resource to cope with uncertainty (Retkowsky et al., 2023).

While agency workers in *Chapter 3* used their temp job as a steppingstone to a permanent position with a client, gig workers saw their work as filling gaps in their real career plans. In sum, we cannot just generalize nontraditional workers' careers, as there are meaningful differences between them. In this case, motivation for doing nontraditional work, for some workers comes from viewing it as a steppingstone to fulltime employment, while others see it as filling career gaps. In other words, their career motivations are very different, because they have different needs and require different resources, etc., which has implications for how to build sustainable careers.

The person and interaction insights in *Chapters 3* and *4* show that the organization- and institution-levels played a crucial role in producing low career resource levels. To counteract this, in *Chapter 5*, I actively involved stakeholders in co-creating the future of work. I found there were deep issues to be addressed, but we co-created concrete actionable plans to start building that future. Specifically, to build sustainable careers, well-being needs to be seen as equally important to productivity, standardization needs to be combined with customization regarding training and development opportunities, and the legal framework needs to be updated to empower these workers to thrive in their careers instead of to survive.

The integrative model in *Chapter 1*, Figure 1, shows that problems formed when stakeholders' (including the nontraditional worker) interests become lost in translation. As a result, stakeholders fail to understand nontraditional work—the future of work—as a thing in itself, and can only compare it to traditional work..

In sum, the future of work has arrived, but the context is not ready for it. We need to embrace the changing nature of work, such as nontraditional work, and we must deeply understand it to not remain superficial in the insights we produce. These dissertation insights have shown that nontraditional work is a *new form* of work and is much more impacted by context in ways that cannot be addressed simply by a different legal contract. How we can build sustainable careers for these workers remains a journey for scientists, as well as practitioners. It requires stakeholders in the context to step up their game and to innovate ways to navigate the nontraditional work paradoxes to support these workers' careers.

6.3 Theoretical and methodological contributions

6.3.1 Broadening our understanding on careers

This dissertation contributes in novel ways to career theory. First, this dissertation's findings show the relevance of context for career phenomena (Baruch et al., 2015; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Specifically, the insights show context-bound theorizing is important to represent the career experiences of all workers. Most career theories have been built among the "WEIRD" (i.e., Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic) workers (Henrich et al., 2010). I studied agency temps and gig workers in blue collar jobs that unfolded beyond organizational boundaries. Both groups of nontraditional workers were influenced by the context they were in. The agency temps' career self-management was reshaped *by the precarity* they experienced, and the gig workers' career self-management was reshaped *by technology* (the apps) that gamified their career. When they thought of spending time on career investment, e.g., writing job applications for work outside the gig economy, some started to think of the costs in hours of lost income. This prevented them from investing in career activities outside their gig work. This dissertation suggests that major concepts in career theory, not limited to career self-management, need to be rethought to understand careers in the near future, where work is more fragmented, organizational boundaries are increasingly blurry, and labor markets are volatile.

Second, this dissertation's insights add to sustainable career literature (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden et al., 2020) by adding empirical insights on how specific contextual factors may interact with personal agency over time to shape career experiences. These interactions can occur in multiple ways: the context influences agency (e.g., agency temps feel forced to self-profile to find a fulltime job), but also the other way around (e.g., the agency demonstrated by the gig workers to play the algorithm or collaborate with restaurants).

Furthermore, I found not every worker needs a balanced interplay of person, context, and time to be happy, healthy, and productive. The insights also show that for the nontraditional workers I studied, context can be more constraining than supportive. Further, I found that for some nontraditional workers, if they depend on the work to pay their monthly bills, their context constrains them from being proactive. Rather, they are reactive in their career behaviors. These reactive behaviors do not help them thrive, but only allow them to survive. These workers can be locked-in in their careers, hustling from one job to the next or moving from employment to unemployment. Consequently, these workers were busy protecting their current resources, instead of renewing resources in ways that improve their career sustainability. Hence, decreased agency interacts with a constraining context, over time, to unbalance happiness, health, and productivity. This leads to career unsustainability, which has so far not been investigated in the sustainable career literature. Moreover, the contextual factor—the organization—became increasingly blurred and fragmented for nontraditional workers, making it more difficult to understand how shared responsibility (Van der Heijden et al., 2020) for nontraditional workers' careers can be realized. In particular, new ways of organizing, such as online labor platforms, reshuffle a clear understanding of responsibility, and ghost work emerges in that void. This complements prior sustainable career insights that have theorized workers' careers in bureaucratic hierarchical organizations, where clear organizations have specific responsibilities.

6.3.2 Expanding insights on nontraditional workers

This dissertation expands research on nontraditional workers. The insights look beyond push vs. pull motives in the nontraditional work literature (Lopes & Chambel, 2017; McKeown & Cochrane, 2017; Sobral et al., 2019) by deepening understanding of the lived career experiences of these workers (Gioia, 2022). I show that simply contextualizing such traditional concepts does not do justice to the complex and dynamic experiences nontraditional workers have over time. While workers can be pulled into nontraditional work, I found that their motives for entering it were not key determinants for their career experiences.

Over time, the workers I studied often ended up being locked-in in their careers. This challenges the agentic conceptualization of nontraditional workers' career navigation asserted by Ashford et al. (2018), who put resilience and proactivity to the forefront, as a panacea to experience a thriving career as a nontraditional worker.

Further, I add understanding to how contextual factors impact the career experiences of these workers. Instead of theorizing context simply as a different contract type or motive that impacts the experiences, nontraditional workers' lived experiences were impacted by the broader context in which they operate. For instance, workers' social exchanges are reshaped toward self-orientation by technology—that is, by having AI as a boss. Stakeholders struggle to unlock paradoxes they encounter to reconfigure the experiences of these workers.

The unique characteristics of nontraditional work have further ripple effects that are underappreciated, such as invisible labor (Hatton, 2017). Invisible labor, for agency temps, encompasses having one job while looking for a new one, which puts extra strain on these workers. Further, they work extra hard to attain a long-term contract, but this is not rewarded. The invisible labor among gig workers includes the need for workers to pick up the slack in a system while still performing work in it.

Other ripple effects are that, over time, nontraditional workers can lose career resources. As a result, nontraditional workers engage in short-term, more ad-hoc career behavior, which my findings show transforms nontraditional workers' long-term career development into a vicious cycle. This challenge to sustainable careers is likely to increase if the dominant view of transferring responsibilities for career development to workers is maintained, as identified in *Chapters 2* and *3*, unless stakeholders in the context assume responsibility to provide career resources. The lab discussed in *Chapter 5* is a promising first step in that direction.

6.3.3 Generating insights on a paradigm shift in organizational behavior and career literature

This dissertation's insights add to the organizational behavior and career literature by showing that a paradigm shift is needed. In the information system's literature scholars started talking about a potential paradigm shift due to AI technologies becoming more autonomous agents (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Wessel et al., 2023), but in the organizational behavior and career literature, this paradigm shift is less tangible. Many scholars referred to a paradigm shift in the career literature in the 1990s by noting the parenting relationship between workers and organizations is fading—emphasizing individuals' agency. The potential paradigm shift now is that research is needed to reintroduce context into our theorizing (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019; Inkson et al., 2012). The context is needed because sequences of work experiences increasingly happen beyond organizational boundaries. Therefore, integrating context into theorizing becomes a key ingredient to generate meaningful insights regarding how careers are shaped and unfold. Yet, so far scholars remain silent about further articulating this new paradigm. A recent exception is Moorman et al. (2024, p. 364), arguing "that we are now in a new age in which companies and workers are no longer limited to a standard employment contract. (…) work arrangements may now be characterized by a lack of firm boundaries and an increase in flexible employment relationships."

This dissertation's insights help to grasp the paradigm shift—work as we used to know it is changing due to new ways of organizing work, and this has consequences for how careers unfold. Nontraditional workers' experiences are different due to the work's fragmentation and volatility. It is not simply the contract type that makes their experiences different; it is not just the fading parenting relationship, but the entire organization is fading. While boundaryless career shows workers shifting from one stable organizational scaffold to another, the workers of the future face organizations that no longer offer a stable scaffold. Interestingly, while technologies gain more agency, leading to a paradigm shift, organizations become less involved and fluctuate more, which also leads to a paradigm shift. We have had static, bureaucratic organizations for so long that OB, and psychology were not accustomed to looking at context. Yet, this dissertation's insights clearly show that theories from OB and career literatures are challenged and need to be revisited in light of work becoming increasingly fragmented and career environments becoming increasingly volatile. Paradigm shifts do not happen often, but we are deeply into a transition phase leading to a fully new paradigm regarding the future of work. In sum, the new ways of governing work and the temporality that comes along with it, are reshuffling work and careers as we have known them.

6.3.4 Performing research that matters for science and practice

Methodologically, by expanding insights on lived experiences, this dissertation also adds to the literature that calls for more qualitative, discovery-oriented research that represents the reality of those we study, instead of imposing our theories on those we study (Gioia, 2022). I could not agree more with Gioia et al. (2022, p. 175): "The major implication here is that many of our attempts to study organizations as if they obeyed 'laws' similar to physical systems is a fast road to hell." Using a discovery-oriented qualitative method enabled me to see things I had not thought of before. Discovering that I see myself as an ethnographic researcher, the moment I started working in the field felt like coming home. I am inspired by learning through peoples' eyes while I am with them, but at the same time, I also love to be back in the office making sense of the data. I still remember when I told friends and colleagues that I do field work with food riders. I often got replies such as: "But what do you observe? It is so obvious what they do." It was then that I noticed the insightfulness to see the more tacit elements through field work regarding things we think we know, but actually do not.

Going one step further, this dissertation contributes to the emerging literature in recent years exploring how scholars can create impact (Hamdali et al., 2023; Sharma & Bansal, 2020; Wickert et al., 2021). First, I contribute to this literature by showing that creating impact can also come from developing a community of practitioners and researchers that throughout time learn from each other. We need to put value on practitioners and researchers challenging each other in their thinking and helping each other reflect, instead of staying in our like-minded bubbles. While I agree that the "research-practice-gap" is difficult to tackle due to practitioners and researchers speaking different languages (Kieser & Leiner, 2012), this should motivate us to go the extra mile to examine this blind spot. From the beginning, this dissertation had a formal practitioner committee with whom I yearly discussed ongoing insights. Further, at the beginning of my research, my supervisors and I wrote a news item on the public and political discourse about flex work (Retkowsky et al., 2020). As informal spin offs from the formal practitioner committee and news item, this PhD research benefitted from multiple informal coffees with practitioners "off the record." In particular, when I shared the insights of *Chapter 3* with an agency organization director, the person started to reflect on the way they offered developmental opportunities for agency temps. At the beginning of my PhD research, another agency organization director had shown me a key struggle they faced and wanted to change: how can we close the gap of people staying too long in unemployment? This question stuck in my head for years. This showed me how important it is to know how to find each other, and to create a community where we can share thoughts in a safe environment.

We are only beginning to understand how to do research that matters. I am putting the focus here on "doing research that matters," instead of using phrases such as "creating impact" (Hamdali et al., 2023), or "valorization" (Bonaccorsi et al., 2022). I find that the latter terms imply the underlying assumption that research insights are performative as a way to change or reaffirm managers behaviors or decision-making. While I agree that this can be the case, throughout my almost six years in the research world, I noticed the tendency of researchers to engage in "impact making" for the sake of impact making, due to a stronger push from institutions to quantify/measure the relevance and usefulness of research insights (Aguinis et al., 2012). This dissertation research has shown that instead of seeing impact making as an afterthought, it is an on-going thought and engagement. Building and sustaining such a community throughout time brings great value to researchers and practitioners. For instance, the relation then goes beyond "data access," which implies the huge hurdle of knocking at an organization's door the moment the researcher needs data. Instead, it is an ongoing dialogue, in which next steps feel natural, rather than like hurdles. See Table 6.2 for an overview of dialogue activities I engaged in "on record" (thus excluding the many off-the-record coffees).

Second, this dissertation also contributes to the emerging literature around impact making by utilizing and integrating innovative research methods. This dissertation tried to do so by utilizing study insights from the first three studies in a final study with stakeholders. The insights of the prior three studies—while two of them where grounded in social constructivism adopting a discovery stance (Gioia, 2022)—infused the fourth study with stakeholders. Thereby, the fourth study, in *Chapter 5*, is relevant for literature, as well as for the practitioner community. Further, the fourth study is novel in its participatory research. While some methods such as action research did so years ago, scholars are now beginning to expand the boundaries by developing innovative methods for doing so (Gümüsay & Reinecke, 2022).

This dissertation is an empirical example of how to do so. Specifically, I used the prior insights to co-create a desirable future for nontraditional workers' careers, in a future-oriented lab with practitioners, based on the "desirable futures" approach of Gümüsay & Reinecke (2022).

Table 6.2 Overview of dialogue activities I engaged in "on record" based on my dissertation research

Type of activity	Time	Description of activity	Link to activity (if available)
Opinion piece in Dutch newspaper	November 2020	Wrote a newspaper article entitled "Flexwerkers zijn waardevol, laten we daar naar handelen" published in Het Parool (Together with Jos Akkermans and Sanne Nijs)	https://www.parool.nl/columns-opinie/flexwerkers-zijn-waardevol-laten- we-daar-naar-handelen~b9828def/
Workshop at event	December 2020	Designed and hosted workshop entitled "Sustainable Careers: How do we deal with nontraditional workers and job insecurity" at the Research and Policy Meeting of Institute Gak (Together with Judith Langerak - PhD student at Universiteit van Amsterdam, and Adriana Stel - CEO at Doorzaam)	
Presentation at agency organization	December 2020	Designed and presented "Best practices" for account specialists at a temporary employment agency; actively contributed to improvements in nontraditional workers' work and career experiences	
Guest lecture(s)	May 2021; May 2022	Designed and gave guest lecture entitled "Flexibilization of Labor" at Tilburg University in the course 'The Future of Work: Sustainable and Critical Perspectives' by Sanne Nijs	
Symposium at conference	August 2022	Designed and organized a symposium on gig work for the Academy of Management conference 2022, titled "Working for an algorithm: Studying gig workers' career experiences" (Together with Jos Akkermans)	https://doi.org/10.5465/AMBPP.2022.11178symposium
Presentation at agency organization	August, 2022	Designed and presented "Best practices" for account specialists at another temporary employment agency; actively contributed to improvements in nontraditional workers' work and career experiences	
Interview	September 2022	With ZiPconomy (community for nontraditional workers) (Together with Jos Akkermans and Sanne Nijs)	https://zipconomy.nl/2022/09/onderzoekers-duurzame-loopbanen-voor- flexwerkers-eerst-zekerheid-nodig-dan-pas-ruimte-voor-groei/

Future-oriented lab	September 2022	Designed and organized 'DLF Lab: Sustainable Careers for Nontraditional Workers - Practice meets Science' (Co-organized with Jos Akkermans and Sanne Nijs)	https://www.dlf-lab.nl Promo video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeW62yGl2EE&t=3s
Podcast	December 2022	On Flexpraat hosted by Faisel Hoogvliets via SkillsTown, invitation to discuss qualitative study about agency temps' career experiences (Together with Judith Langerak - PhD student at Universiteit van Amsterdam)	https://open.spotify.com/episode/6INFllwi9O7L2C0AGwYpQQ?si=f8e330d34119492f
Interview	December 2023	Interview with ABU (Algemene Bond Uitzendondernemingen) (Together with Adriana Stel - CEO at Doorzaam)	https://www.dlf-lab.nl/media/ (full interview in magazine of ABU)
Guest lecture	December 2022	Designed and gave a guest lecture entitled "HR and New Ways of Working" at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in the course 'Managing People – Psychological Foundations' by Lena Knappert	
Presentation at ministry	February 2023)	Presented 4-year PhD research presentation at SZW-Wetenschapsdag	
Speaker at event	April 2023	Designed and gave a talk entitled "Future-oriented agency work" at Summit Toekomstgericht flexen & detacheren	
Workshop at event	June 2023	Designed and hosted workshop entitled "Naar een duurzame toekomst van werk: Met de juiste ondersteuning proactief aan de slag" at Research and Policy Meeting of Institute Gak 'The value and quality of work'? (Together with Judith Langerak - PhD student at Universiteit van Amsterdam, Steven Gudde - Directeur Impact en arbeidsmarkt at Olympia, and Marcella de Muinck - Directeur Werkvertrouwen at Olympia)	

6.4 Limitations of the reported research and future research opportunities

A sharp reader may wonder whether I really studied careers or work/jobs. This reflects a limitation regarding the construct boundary of "career." Job and career are inherently connected because a career comprises the accumulation of job experiences. For instance, in Chapter 3, when developing the paper, I reflected on whether I should reframe the study's findings as "job management" or "work management," instead of "career self-management," to best represent the participants' lived experiences. I felt job management and work management were not adequate to explain our participants' subjective career experiences. In the interviews, agency temps clearly reported how they experienced their work experiences over time, instead of talking about related matters bound to one single job. Thus, I clarify that, for these participants, we move beyond the meanings that have become associated with the concept of "career" through its development within the context of the WEIRD population. For example, for the study in *Chapter 4*, we viewed a series of gigs as a career experience. The gig workers could have stopped at any moment, so we viewed one gig as one job. Strictly speaking, in line with the current career definition, I studied "careers" of these nontraditional workers in the gig economy. That is, Arthur et al. (1989, p. 8) describe a career as "the unfolding sequence of a person's work experiences over time." Further, regarding the study (lab) in *Chapter 5*, one could likewise argue, the stakeholders talked about the nontraditional worker's job. However, we focused during the lab on discussions about nontraditional workers' work experience over time. Although these reflections show that, as stated above, a job and career are inherently connected, the meaning of job and career become more difficult to disentangle for nontraditional workers.

In traditional work, it was part of the job to build career resources. There is an emerging understanding of the deconstruction of jobs into more and more fragmented tasks

(Rogiers & Collings, 2024). Similarly, we could also start to think of the deconstruction of careers into more and more fragmented jobs. This has huge implications, because the way we organize work influences the way careers unfold. Career scholars have been talking about more dynamic and less linear careers since the 1990s, but in the future of work, careers may be radically different for a sizable portion of the workforce; they will become "portfolio careers." Portfolio careers are not a series of jobs but, instead, a collage of various career-related experiences and events (jobs, gigs, could be a combination, etc.). If careers change so fundamentally, questions arise such as: How do we develop human capital as a society without the developmental pathways currently associated with the idea of career? How much agency can one expect of workers to navigate this change in the nature of careers? Interesting future research can be done to deeply investigate these changes. For example, it would be interesting to co-create understanding about careers with nontraditional workers themselves and their stakeholders (Sharma & Bansal, 2020).

A methodological limitation is that I have not studied careers from a process perspective (Langley, 1999). I explored careers conceptually (*Chapter 2*), retrospectively (*Chapters 3* and *4*), and futuristically (*Chapter 5*). Thus, future research is encouraged to follow people for a longer time to theorize a process view about how their lived experiences may take different pathways. Further, we did not adopt any theoretical sampling to consider gender differences or minorities, yet several other studies' insights show gender differences are likely to influence precarious work (Young, 2010; Vosko et al., 2009). The kaleidoscope career model highlights that people reconfigure their careers by navigating through different phases of their life to align their roles (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). A recent study found that women and men prefer nontraditional work in the gig economy, but women scored stronger on the flexibility it gives them to handle their family demands (Churchill & Craig, 2019). However, next to the negative outcomes I found regarding being locked-in, other recent insights show that it can be difficult to transition from nontraditional work in the gig economy to work outside of it (Kost et al., 2020). For example, while women may love flexibility at one point in time, this may change, and they may struggle to transition out of it. Hence, it could be that nontraditional work further gives rise to the "sticky floor" (Booth et al., 2003; Ingram & Oh, 2022), which highlights the pattern of not being able to move up the ladder, or, in other words, to advance in their career (Baert et al., 2016). In sum, it can be insightful to explore gender and nontraditional workers' lived experiences over time.

Another limitation is that, during the time of this research, new developments have been arising. Since November 2022, generative AI (GenAI) has disrupted business models and the labor market. Several journals in different disciplines have been calling for research on GenAI and work (e.g., AMR call for papers, 2024; Business Horizons call for papers, 2023; International Journal of Information Management call for papers, 2023). Toward the end of the studies conducted as part of this dissertation, I looked more at what role technology—an app coordinating work via AI—can play in nontraditional work. Next to technology in the gig economy, these GenAI developments are also likely to be very relevant for nontraditional work. Potentially, they show that organizations may become even less keen to hire workers on a long-term basis (Demirci et al., 2023; Hui et al., 2023). The business world is becoming more unpredictable and organizations more fluid for a wider range of tasks. In addition, in empirical studies, the replaceability and dehumanization of nontraditional workers has been a recurring theme. Interesting future research could be done on how GenAI may further play into the development of replaceability and dehumanization, which are part of nontraditional workers' lived experiences (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). The other side of the coin is that GenAI could also be a colleague (Seeber et al., 2020) or an assistant (Retkowsky et al., 2024) for nontraditional workers—potentially helping them in their work or attainment of skills. For instance, nontraditional workers reported to experience high demands on career resources when applying for jobs. Potentially, GenAI could assist these workers in job applications. In sum, future research is promising on how technology is further reconfiguring the lived experiences of nontraditional workers.

Finally, one could argue a limitation regarding the construct boundary is that I claim to have investigated sustainable careers of nontraditional workers while directly drawing on this theory in only *Chapters 2* and *5*. However, this dissertation took a problem-oriented research approach (Wickert et al., 2021) by examining how to improve the careers of nontraditional workers to be more sustainable. To address this problem, I conducted four studies and utilized the sustainable career theory only when it was fitting. Especially, in *Chapters 3* and *4*, where I conducted empirical research and adopted grounded theory to live up to the participants lived realities, it was important to draw on a theory that was most representative and helpful to make sense of the patterns in the data. Thus, I let the problem of each study inform the theoretical lens for that study, in line with a problem-oriented approach (Wickert et al., 2021). However, to organize and make sense of the four studies, the sustainable career framework fit well to tackle the all-encompassing problem of building sustainable careers for nontraditional workers.

6.4 Implications for practice

While in *Chapter 5* I identify in-depth practical implications across the studies of this dissertation as part of "routes," in this chapter, I note practical implications that are connected to key practical takeaways. The implications are therefore from a "higher level" bird's eye view based on my dissertation's insights.

6.4.1 Implications for stakeholders

For practitioners, it is key to join knowledge hubs around nontraditional work research. This helps to attain understanding on how to further improve the status quo of nontraditional workers in the labor market. Thereby, it is key that different practitioners that I refer to as stakeholders—such as policy makers, directors of platforms and agency organizations, and managers at client and agency organizations—and nontraditional workers themselves, come together. This dissertation has shown that support in their work context is needed to help nontraditional workers reclaim agency toward happy, healthy, and productive career experiences. However, in *Chapter 5*, I also found various paradoxes that stakeholders have to navigate. Therefore, practitioners and researchers are important to keep the dialogue alive and to learn from each other, as there is still much to do and to be improved to build truly sustainable careers for nontraditional workers. As part of this dissertation, I organized a lab (DLF Lab) as a way to foster dialog. It was a one-time event, but having similar recurring annual or semi-annual get togethers of nontraditional work researchers and practice stakeholders could be a promising way to develop practical implications that are long lasting. Examples for this are the Fairwork foundation (Graham & Woodcock, 2018) and the Reshaping Work foundation (Verhaeghe, 2022), which have become centers of expertise for practitioners, as well as for researchers.

6.4.2 Implications for nontraditional workers

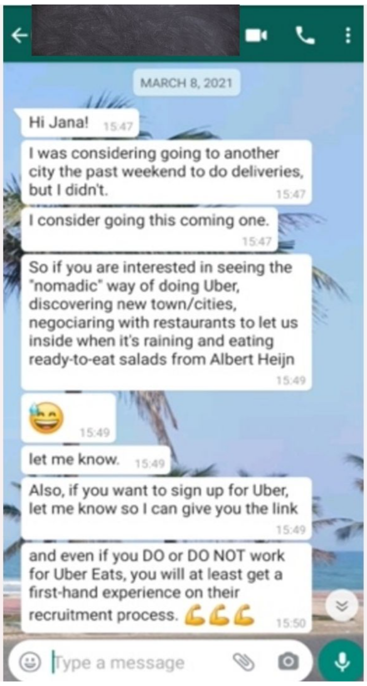
Across the different studies of this dissertation, I have found that workers who are financially dependent on nontraditional work to make a living lack career resources over time. Consequently, workers struggle to navigate their careers beyond the short-term hustling that can negatively impact their psychological well-being (Ravenelle, 2019). To support workers in reclaiming long-term agency over their careers, it is helpful for workers to join communities that can provide career resources. For example, in the labor market, external foundations, such as Doorzaam (financed by the government), provide training and coaching tailored to nontraditional workers' needs.

Two stories still stay in my mind. First, a nontraditional worker who participated in my study told me that, for her, after all the years of not believing in herself due to hustling while being locked-in, she managed to get "un-locked." From a foundation responsible for supporting nontraditional workers, she received training that helped her switch occupations from being a customer service worker to becoming a teacher. Another story, less bright, was when I was shadowing a nontraditional worker at work outdoors. He stopped his bike to take pictures of jobs that were advertised in the window of an agency organization. He explained to me that it was so difficult for him to find jobs outside the gig economy while in the Netherlands. He was highly educated in engineering and from Romania. He wanted to integrate into the Dutch labor market and had hoped this gig work was only temporary. He eventually left the Netherlands, because he could not find other work here. In contrast to the prior story, this nontraditional gig worker in the gig economy lacked a supporting community to help him reclaim agency. Thus, nontraditional workers who feel locked-in to unsatisfactory work need communities offering career coaching, trainings, and finance management that can help them overcome the difficulties of "short-term" hustling.

Chapter 7

Small gallery from field work

Small gallery from field work



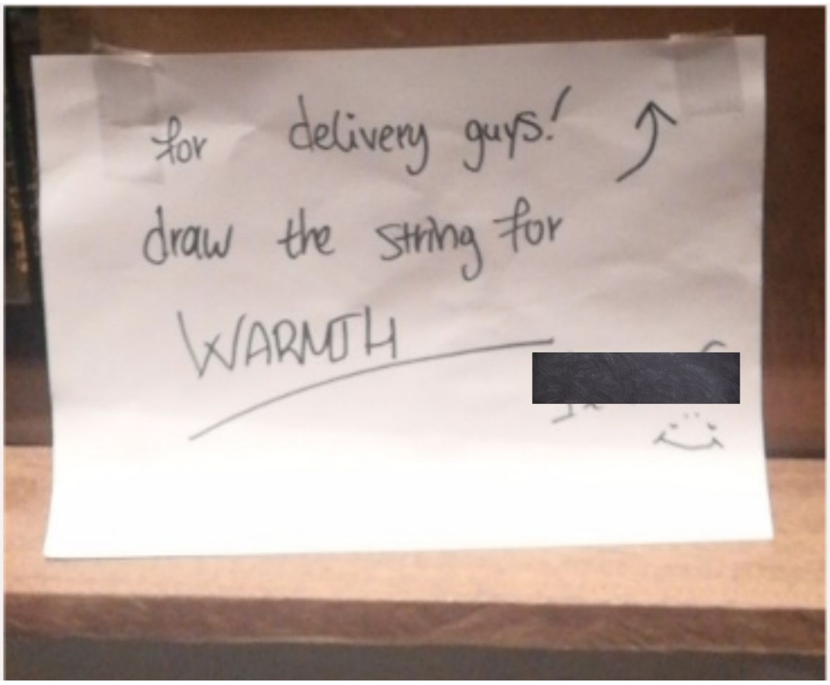
Uitnodiging voor veld werk.

Vrije identiteit.

Inkomsten zijn het beste
als het slecht weer is.

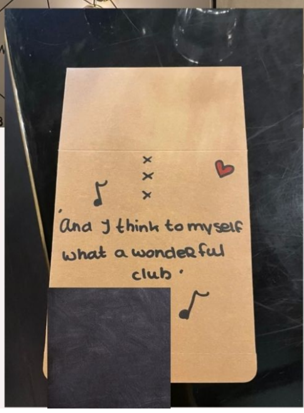
Halfautomatische
communicatie met de
consument.

Creëeren van betekenisvolle
interacties met consumenten.
Zie je mij?
Snoep voor de consument.



Restaurant bouwt band op met bezorgers door heater.

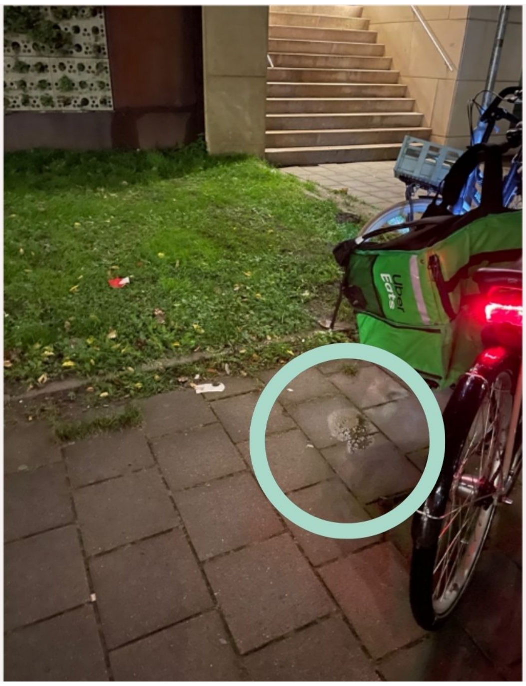
Woordspelen met bekende liedjes en 'club' - de vibe naar de klant brengen/ anders zijn



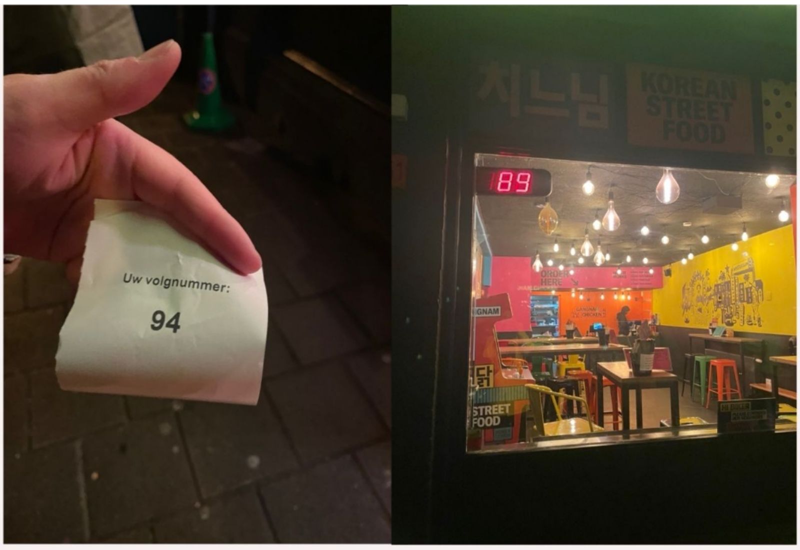
Gepersonaliseerde tassen met leuke citaten van bekende liedjes en 'club' woordspelen (branding en het creëren van uniciteit op mainstream platformen met gebrek aan band' met t online klant.

Restaurants werken met meerdere platforms tegelijk.

Restaurants werken met meerdere platforms tegelijk.

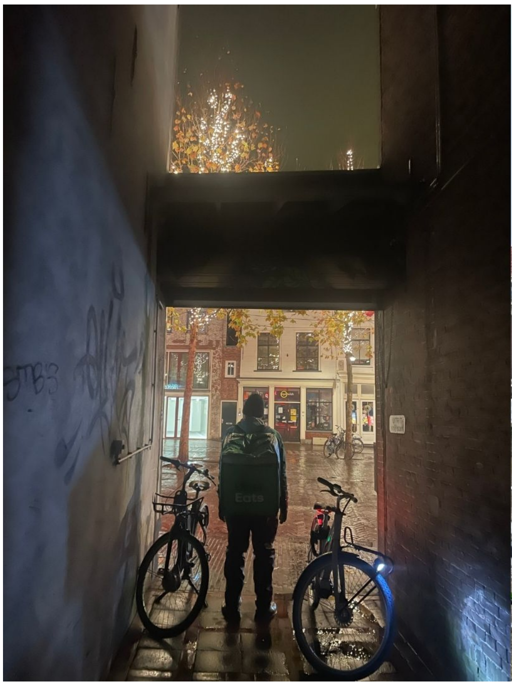


Een drankje gemorst in de levering tas. Gedwongen werkonderbreking om de tas te laten drogen. Trucje hier om de tas met de zijkant naar beneden aan de fiets te hangen.

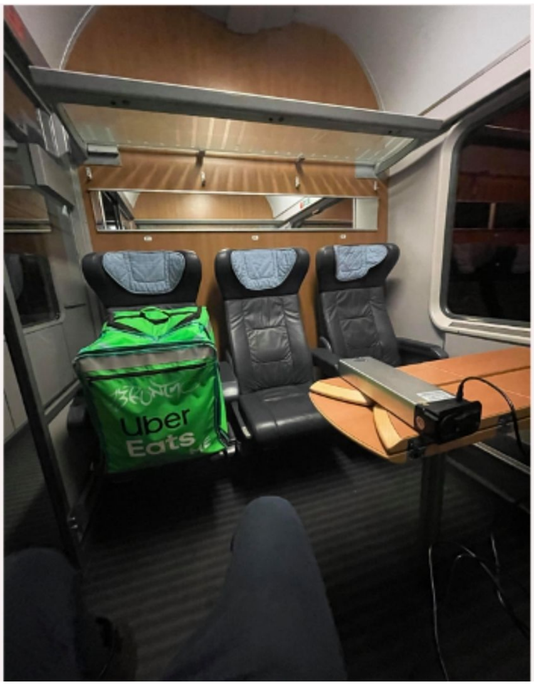


Voorbeeld van hoe een restaurant bezorgers beheert via een ticketsysteem.

Foto van pad (61km) tijdens hele dagdienst in Delft (op een e-bike).



"Tijdelijke homes" onder de bogen om beschermd te zijn tegen regen en wind.



Op weg naar huis. Een nieuwe 'bezorgst-stad' had promo's.

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Summary

Summary

Labor is increasingly organized via short-term contracts; I refer to this as nontraditional work in the dissertation. This reflects a major societal change. For example, in the gig economy, work is organized via gigs, which are short-term contracts for one task. Lifetime employment is fading, and employment risks are being transferred from the organization to the worker. Nontraditional workers are now responsible for finding sequences of jobs and need to self-manage their social security, such as pension and sickness benefits. They can no longer rely on traditional employers to manage their work lives. While much has been written about how traditional work is characterized by long-term employment in bureaucratic organizations, our knowledge of nontraditional workers' work experiences over time remains limited. To address this shortcoming in the literature, I adopt a sustainable career lens to answer the overarching research question: How can nontraditional workers develop sustainable careers?

The dissertation contains four studies from which I gained insights to answer this question. In Chapter 2, I conducted a critical review of the nontraditional work field. This review complements the dominant "single job" view on nontraditional workers' experiences, by highlighting how nontraditional workers are navigating beyond organizational boundaries. I examine conceptual, review, and empirical articles (n=208) published from 2008 to December 2021. I build a new conceptual perspective—sustainable careers—on nontraditional workers' work experiences over time. I propose important future research avenues based on this new perspective.

In Chapter 3, I study how nontraditional workers themselves navigate their careers. Informed by the gap in the sustainable career perspective, I decided to look at the workers themselves. I did so by drawing on a semi-structured interview study with 27 agency temps to gather their voices about their career realities. I find that the precarious career environment

shaped agency temps' career self-management. Agency temps' career self-management is short-term-oriented and primarily reactive. They have survival and stability as career goals. Further, agency temps enact four career behaviors: moonlighting, self-profiling, compensatory career behavior, and job search behavior. I discover two negative long-term results of these career behaviors: being locked-in and experiencing resource loss during unemployment. This chapter challenges the assumption in career self-management literature that individuals have (full) agency to (fully) self-manage their careers.

In Chapter 4, I study how nontraditional workers experience their work on the group level. In stable hierarchical settings, workers are surrounded by other humans. Yet, for nontraditional workers there can be an algorithm that is mediating the work, thereby likely impacting the interactions workers have. I draw on 75 interviews with riders and restaurant staff, 80 hours of shadowing of riders, and social media posts. I find that gig workers perceive poor treatment by the platforms. This poor treatment caused three distinct social exchange mechanisms: Self-oriented reciprocity (reaction toward platform), de-socializing social exchanges (triadic reciprocity), and repairing social exchanges (triadic inverted reciprocity). The mechanisms shape social exchange quality. In particular, via self-oriented reciprocity and de-socializing the social exchanges, low-quality social exchanges develop. In contrast, via repairing social exchanges, high-quality social exchanges can develop.

In Chapter 5, I study—in contrast to previous research's retrospective view in theorizing—this study takes a forward-looking approach and co-creates an actionable desirable future for the careers of nontraditional workers. To do so, I organized a "future-oriented lab" session with 50 stakeholders around the nontraditional worker, such as policy makers, HR managers at client organizations, labor union representatives, and directors at agency organizations and platforms. I mapped out paradoxes stakeholders encounter and propose implementable pathways for leaders to foster sustainable career paths for nontraditional workers.

This dissertation makes several contributions. First, it contributes in novel ways to career theory. Specifically, the insights show context-bound theorizing is important to represent the career experiences of all workers. Second, this dissertation expands research on nontraditional workers. The insights look beyond push vs. pull motives in the nontraditional work literature by deepening understanding of the lived career experiences of these workers. Third, this dissertation adds to the organizational behavior and career literatures by showing that a paradigm shift is needed. This dissertation's insights help to grasp the paradigm shift—work as we used to know it is changing due to new ways of organizing work, and this has consequences for how careers unfold. Thereby, these dissertation's insights invite to revisit organizational behavior and career literatures that are challenged by work becoming increasingly fragmented and career environments becoming increasingly volatile. Fourth, this dissertation contributes to the emerging literature around impact making by utilizing and integrating innovative research methods. This dissertation did so by utilizing study insights from the first three studies in a final study with stakeholders. Specifically, I used these prior insights to co-create a desirable future for nontraditional workers' careers, in a future-oriented lab with practitioners, based on the "desirable futures" approach.

Besides these theoretical contributions, this dissertation also has practical implications for stakeholders and for nonstandard workers themselves. First, for practitioners, it is key to join knowledge hubs around nontraditional work research. This helps to attain understanding on how to further improve the status quo of nontraditional workers in the labor market. Second, for nontraditional workers to reclaim long-term agency over their careers, it is helpful to join communities that can provide career resources. For example, in the labor market, external foundations, such as Doorzaam (financed by the government), provide training and coaching tailored to nontraditional workers' needs.

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