

VULNERABILITY AT WORK: (UN)SAFETY CULTURE IN TEMPORARY JOBS

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, many studies have highlighted particular changes in working conditions and in the composition of the workforce: among others, the increasing use of temporary contracts and the massive entrance of immigrant workers into Western labour markets. These structural changes imply the redefinition of health and safety standards and the introduction of a new analytical category, called “vulnerable work.” In order to contribute to the debate, this article presents the results of a qualitative research project on the health and safety conditions of temporary workers carried out in a province of northeastern Italy. First, the aim of the article is to highlight the hazards and risks faced by temporary workers, which contribute to the production of a specific condition of vulnerability. The culturalist approach adopted here shows that the construction of (un)safety at work is the result of the intersection among different dimensions of vulnerability. Second, the article has an operational goal. On the basis of the research results, in particular on the basis of the interviews conducted with key informants, some recommendations for policymaking and human resource management are provided. In particular, the article points out that injuries sustained by temporary workers are often the consequence of an underestimation both of their specific risks and of a more general state of vulnerability.

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to shed light on the health and safety conditions of temporary workers, who—due to their low wages, risky working conditions, and

occupational and life instability—are certainly definable as vulnerable (Belin et al., 2011; Mitlacher, 2008; Sargeant & Giovannone, 2011; TUC Commission on Vulnerable Employment, 2008). To this end, the article will present the main results of research on the health and safety conditions of precarious workers recently carried out in the province of Trento, in northeastern Italy.

This article will contribute to the debate on vulnerable workers in the following ways. First, it has an epistemic aim. This strand of research has frequently analysed the individual characteristics that increase the vulnerability of workers in the labour market. By contrast, here a culturalist perspective is adopted with regard to the topics of health and safety, the purpose being to study the working conditions of precarious workers. Following this latter approach, the analysis centres on the concept of “safety culture,” which, as we shall see, allows workplace health and safety to be conceived as resulting from a concerted and collective process, which comes about within a specific work context and consists of everyday and situated working practices (Gherardi, 2006; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2000; Turner, 1992). In particular, the article explores the processes by which different representations of risk and safety are produced and re-produced by a variety of actors: workers, managers, and employers at a micro and organisational level; and policymakers and institutional actors variously involved in workplace health and safety at a more macro and institutional level.

Second, this article has an operational goal. On the basis of the results obtained and in particular on the basis of the interviews conducted with key informants (representatives of institutions, human resource managers, doctors, trade unionists, etc.), some recommendations for policymakers and human resource managers are provided. In particular, it will be pointed out that the injuries sustained by temporary workers are often the consequence of an underestimation both of their specific risk conditions and of a more general condition of vulnerability.

The article is organised into five sections. Following this introductory section, in section two, below, we introduce the theoretical framework. In sections three and four, we present the research design and the “(un)safety” stories of the precarious workers interviewed. The study concludes with a discussion of possible ways to strengthen workers’ rights, which considers the interviews with the key informants. In particular, we want to contribute to the debate on the new challenges faced by policymakers and human resource managers (HRMs) in improving the safety conditions of temporary workers.

DANGEROUS RELATIONS: TEMPORARY WORK AND HEALTH AND SAFETY RISKS

In recent years, scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds have examined the rapid and large-scale changes taking place in the labour market (Appay & Jefferys, 2009; Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011). The widening gap between, on the one hand, employees granted full rights both within and outside

the organisations for which they work, and on the other, those with limited access to rights has directed attention to less protected jobs. As a consequence, the concept of “vulnerable work” has been developed, defined as insecure and low-quality employment, with little possibility of bargaining with the employer, low union membership, and—in general—limited access to employment rights (Lucas, 2004; Sargeant & Giovannone, 2011). This concept encompasses a range of factors that put workers at risk of employment rights abuse (TUC Commission on Vulnerable Employment, 2008), as well as at risk of injury, illness, and/or poverty arising from low wages, limited control over workplace conditions, little protection against health and safety risks in the workplace, and fewer opportunities than other workers have for training and career progression (Burgess & Campbell, 1998; Rodgers & Rodgers, 1989). Moreover, work vulnerability stems from the intersection among diverse individual characteristics (Browne & Misra, 2003; Walby, 2007), such as gender, inclusion in the young or elderly age groups, and migrant status.

This article focuses on a specific aspect of work vulnerability among those just mentioned, namely, on the interconnections between the increasing use by employers of temporary contracts and workplace health and safety. In fact, numerous surveys have shown that precarious workers—compared with those on permanent contracts—are employed in environments characterised by a high presence of risks; that they have heavier workloads; and that they perform fatiguing and repetitive tasks. They are also largely outside of health surveillance systems; they work in worse health and safety conditions than do other workers; and they are consequently more at risk of work-related injuries and occupational diseases (Barrett & Sargeant, 2008; Di Nunzio, 2011; Underhill & Quinlan, 2011). Furthermore, from an organisational point of view, these workers experience precariousness in the sense that they often occupy marginal positions in workplaces from the point of view of relationships with colleagues, superiors, and trade unions (Castel, 1995; Sennett, 1998). Precarious workers have less access than others to information and training in regard to both their work in general and their health and safety in particular (Grimshaw et al., 2001). Finally, it should be noted that, especially in periods of economic crisis like the current one, precarious workers are most at risk of losing their jobs or not having their contracts renewed. Compared with workers on open-ended contracts, they are consequently more liable to blackmail and more exposed to stress and burnout (Tsianos & Papadopoulos, 2006).

Most studies of the interconnections between work precariousness and health and safety conditions have been focused on the structural elements that make a particular sector more dangerous than others and on the statistics relative to the individual characteristics that tend to exacerbate vulnerability in the labour market. This article instead adopts a culturalist approach to health and safety, the purpose being to explore them in light of the everyday routines of workers employed on fixed-term contracts. The analysis therefore centres on the concept of

safety culture (Pidgeon, 1991; Turner, 1992), understood as a feature that characterises the overall functioning of a workplace. A safety culture comprises a set of beliefs, norms, attitudes, and practices, both social and technical, intended (or otherwise) to minimise the exposure of people to conditions considered dangerous or calamitous (Gherardi, Nicolini, & Odella, 1997; Turner, 1992). The culturalist approach seeks to reveal the social, political, and technological processes that combine to make a situation or a place either “safe” or “risky.” It also emphasises that the construction of safety depends on a complex set of organisational routines, everyday actions, and work habits that arise in the specific work environment under consideration.

This research, like other studies (Ibáñez & Narocki, 2012), aims to show how the structural conditions of insecurity, both those related to the individual characteristics of vulnerable workers and those related to the employment sectors with traditionally high accident rates, are turned into norms and everyday practices that are functional to the reproduction of the same insecurity. A culturalist approach allows us to closely observe the lack of congruence between formal and informal safety rules and the way in which both can be carried out in the same workplace. In the case of the formal rules, for example, employers often tend to present a surface safety climate (Walker, 2010) on days of safety inspections, by ordering everyone to conform to the formal rules. In this case, the safety culture becomes a sort of organisational fad (Cox & Flin, 1998). In the case of informal rules, vulnerable workers may develop such rules that further undermine workplace safety. This could be due either to workers’ individual characteristics (such as being a woman, a migrant worker, and/or a temporary worker) or to the structural conditions of sectors where vulnerable workers are generally employed (these conditions include, for example, the low rate of union membership, the dependence on the employer rather than on professional accreditation for professional status, and the pressure on work rhythms, which tends to undermine the interest in safety).

The greatest compromise (often tacit) is reached in the case of migrant workers, with the chilling effect—namely, the fact that workers are reluctant to complain about substandard labour conditions, lest they draw any government attention to their unauthorised employment or undocumented status (Rathod, 2010). The literature about the chilling effect is inclined to obscure individual agency, conceiving migrant workers as swayed by structural forces. The culturalist approach, instead, allows a close analysis of their choices in terms of how to perform their assigned duties; whether and how to utilise safety protections or follow safe working procedures; and whether to raise concerns about health and safety matters. The lack of congruence between formal and informal safety rules illustrates why simply changing the legal framework is not enough to ensure a real improvement in health and safety standards. Although temporary and permanent workers in all the countries in the European Union have for some time had formally equal rights in terms of safety protection, clear differences in

substance still persist. Changing rules and regulations is not sufficient on its own; a constant process of constructing workplace safety standards is also required (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2000). If a safety culture is not instilled in organisational settings by the practices and policies of personnel management, there is the risk that responses to the regulations will be merely cosmetic. The challenge is therefore to prevent organisations from complying with only the minimum standards in order to pass or circumvent institutional controls with the least possible effort, and instead to induce them to make real investments in the safety of their workers and therefore in the quality of their work (Gherardi et al., 1997). A culturalist approach—which is well suited for grasping micro-organisational dynamics—is particularly efficacious in specifying possible actions by policy-makers and human resource managers to rectify the current inequalities in safety protection between precarious workers and those with permanent contracts.

Having discussed the theoretical framework of this study, we now describe the research. After this, we shall explore the complex linkages between job precariousness and safety by examining the experiences recounted by temporary workers who have suffered work-related injuries.

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

The discussion in the text that follows draws on a research project entitled SICURTEMP: Sicurezza e Benessere Lavorativo tra Vecchi e Nuovi Contratti Temporanei [Workplace Safety and Well-being between Old and New Temporary Contracts], conducted in the province of Trento, in northeastern Italy. Besides gathering knowledge of the linkages between work precariousness and health and safety risks, the purpose of the research was also to make a real impact within the local context in regard to the following: definition of action strategies; promotion of good practices; and design of training modules on risk prevention for workers on temporary contracts.

Various research instruments were used in the research. First, secondary analysis was conducted on quantitative data relative to injuries reported at provincial level by workers hired on fixed-term contracts in the period 2007–2011. From this we identified the two employment sectors—personal care services, and catering and tourism—on which we needed to concentrate our analysis, in that they recorded the largest number of injuries reported by precarious workers. Specifically, among those who reported an injury between 2007 and 2011 while working on a temporary contract, there were 72 individuals in catering and tourism (41 women—16 migrants and 25 Italians; and 31 men—3 migrants and 28 Italians) and 47 in personal care services (39 women—8 migrants and 31 Italians; and 8 men—one migrant and 7 Italians). Starting from these data, 20 in-depth interviews were then conducted with workers on fixed-term contracts at the time of the injury in the two selected sectors. The interviews collected the “(un)safety stories” of the workers, so that their experiences and risks, and the reactions of the

organisations in which the injuries occurred, could be reconstructed. Specifically, the interviews covered five main thematic blocks: the interviewee's work story; the organisation in which the injury occurred; relations and learning on the job; the injury; and the interviewee's postinjury experience.

Moreover, the focus on the sectors of catering and tourism, on the one hand, and on personal care services on the other—both characterised by a large presence of women and migrants—made it possible to focus on the intersections (Browne & Misra, 2003; Walby, 2007) between job precariousness and other factors potentially leading to discrimination or inequality. The interweaving of these factors, in fact, may generate work profiles indicating particular vulnerability in terms of health and safety.

Subsequently, on the basis of the main results obtained from the stories of the workers interviewed, 20 interviews were conducted with key informants variously involved in workplace health and safety in the province: representatives of institutions, human resource managers, occupational health doctors, and people operating in trade unions, bilateral bodies set up by trade unions and firm associations, professional associations, employment agencies, and so on. Discussions with the key informants boosted the applicative relevance of the research in terms of policies and best practices at the organisational and local level.

Section four, below, considers the stories recounted by the temporary workers. We present the interviewees' descriptions of the organisations for which they were working at the time of the injury. In particular, we highlight differences related to gender, to migrant status, and to the type of employment contract. These intersections, as we shall see, generate patterns of vulnerability (in terms of contract, career, and entitlement to rights) closely bound up with insecurity. Section five concludes the article by examining some of the salient features emerging from the interviews with the key informants, which centred on the main issues revealed by the interviews with the precarious workers. The purpose will be to explore possible policies and actions aimed at preventing risks and to create an organisational culture able to protect and promote workforce health and safety regardless of the type of contract.

STORIES OF (UN)SAFETY AT WORK: BETWEEN PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT AND RISK

In this section, we present some of the main results from our analysis of the interviews conducted in the two sectors covered by the research. The collected stories highlight the difficulty of coping with or avoiding risk situations when employed on a temporary contract. They also recount details of the injury suffered, the reactions of the organisation, and the consequences for the subsequent work career and life course of the informant. In the first subsection, we discuss the empirical material through a thematic analysis of recurring and cross-sectional elements in the collected stories. Since our aim is to understand the implications of precariousness for the quality of everyday working life and particularly for

health and safety, we look at the content of the interviews and the related contexts. In the second subsection, we have tried to present two individual life stories in their entirety, one in the catering and tourism sector, and one in personal services. These stories have been selected as case studies because of their particular relevance and their ability to represent the larger corpus of interviews. Fictional names have been given to the interviewees in order to ensure their anonymity. Every excerpt from an interview quoted below provides the interviewee's age and employment sector (catering and tourism or personal services).

Within each of the two sectors, we focused both on stories about interviewees who had consolidated experience in their job, despite unstable contractual conditions, and on more fragmented work stories, recounted by people who had varied experiences in several jobs, even in very different workplaces and sectors. In fact, as we shall see, experience and competence with respect to the job plays a role of primary importance in conditioning the risks to which precarious workers are subject.

Is There Someone Who Can Say “No”? Coping with or Avoiding Risks in Temporary Jobs

In setting out the results of the research, it is first necessary to dwell on the conditions of work vulnerability and physical insecurity characterising the jobs of the interviewees. The focus is on their experiences and on the safety culture conveyed by their accounts. We shall therefore concentrate on the mechanisms with which temporary employees absorb, reproduce, or modify the culture of (un)safety in their dealings with the organisation for which they work. Here, safety is understood as a set of interdependent organisational conversations or practices (Gherardi et al., 1997). First the safety conditions in the catering industry are considered, and then the conditions in the personal services sector.

I've had all kinds of jobs. . . . This restaurant asked me if I could go and lend them a hand. I began as a dogsbody in the kitchen, and then in the end I was doing all the cooking and everything else. . . . I looked after my own safety, let's say, because they did zero, nothing, zilch! In the kitchen . . . I had an extinguisher if need be, but I was never given anything else. No safety shoes, no overalls, no gloves. . . . I got them myself. I went to buy a pair of safety clogs at a health centre. I said, "I work in a kitchen, I'd like to have . . ." I was terrified of being scalded . . . because I got scalded once, but I didn't ask for sick leave, nothing, I left. I took four days off, kept quiet, and then quit. I worked a year with an injured foot and kept quiet, and then left. Also because we'd been friends for 30 years. (Gabiella, 66 years old, catering and tourism)

[What is safe or unsafe] you only learn from experience. When you've worked for years in a kitchen and always tried to work as best you can, you immediately see if there's something lacking. . . . When you've seen order, you start by looking at the floor, you look at the ceiling lights and check

if they're dangling as sometimes happens, or if the hood is secure and won't fall on your head, and that there are no drops of oil that might splash down your back. . . . But if you're safe in that workplace in the morning, you're also safe there in the evening and during the day. But with tiredness and especially in the long run, it begins to get dangerous. Because you're no longer sensible. . . . Skipping rest shifts is quite normal for us. . . . As long as you have an ethic of a particular kind, even if you have flu you'll be at the restaurant. In the evening we do 50 covers. You can count on a professional being present on the job. (Mario, 38 years old, catering and tourism)

The two interviewees, both of whom were employed in the catering industry when they suffered their injuries, worked for very different organisations in terms of the processes of safety construction. Moreover, their accounts represent a very clear example of different processes of risk construction, based on different organisational contexts and professional statuses.

Gabriella's story highlights the risks run by an inexperienced worker entering a highly informal work environment (a family-run restaurant) with extremely risky work practices, entirely noncompliant with safety standards. Two particularly interesting aspects emerge from Gabriella's story. The first was related specifically to physical safety. She was not given any kind of safety training and not even given the basic protection devices, which she had to purchase at her own expense. Also because she had been hired more because of her acquaintance with the owners than because of formally recognised skills, it was difficult for her to avoid exposure to danger and to exercise her right to work in safe conditions. The organisation for which she was working was clearly characterised more by a risk culture than by a safety culture. The second element of interest concerns the problems regarding the right to sick leave. The limited structuring of the organisational context placed the onus of managing the work solely on Gabriella (the only cook at the restaurant) and thus presumably made it difficult for her to take leave.

By contrast, Mario had had a decidedly more coherent work career, always within the same sector, albeit in different organisations. Through his previous experience, he had come into contact with much more structured workplaces, apparently with safety cultures that afforded greater protection—at least as regards the maintenance of the restaurant kitchen and its equipment.

Consequently, Mario had developed a set of skills relative to what is safe and what is not, and he was immediately able to recognise a dangerous work environment. Nevertheless, his long experience did not shelter him from potentially risky situations. In his case, the risk did not derive from the informality of the employment relationship or from the limited structuring of the context (as in Gabriella's case), but rather from the pace and pressure that characterise work in a large restaurant. Added to this was a work culture that seemingly extended beyond the individual organisation to encompass the profession and above all the

community of reference. In fact, a “professional” cook is defined as one who is constantly available to the organisation and has a strong sense of belonging to his/her professional community. It is necessary to show loyalty and dedication to this ideal community, even when it means a workload harmful to health.

Beyond the pressures of the community of reference, the size of the organisation and also the managerial choices and cultures of catering and tourism organisations also seem to contribute to the construction of (un)safety conditions in the workplace. The effects of managerial choices and cultures are seen in the excerpts below:

The work can be to a very tight schedule, let's say . . . when you find the company that makes you drudge, “I have to do it,” “I have to do it,” this is the problem, rather than the signs “watch out for the slicer,” “watch out for the knife,” etc. etc, these are real problems in my opinion. Injuries are caused by tiredness. If I have to drudge and I cannot stop for a second to stay in the agreed times to prepare the stuff, well . . . maybe it would take another person to help me out. For the cost of labour and so on, they try to squeeze you . . . and to optimise the workforce. (Luca, 31 years old, catering and tourism)

I tumbled down during the breakfast service and since usually it happens that you don't have day off, the touristic season begins and ends without day off and you are already exhausted in the middle of the season, right? It happens this way. . . . Then it is so not only in this place, but everywhere, in 90% of the hotels of the whole valley. The problem is that here, I don't know, they make you work for the season: I begin on December 7 and end on April 20, without day off! 9, 10, 12 working hours a day. There is no safety at work. . . . And then, as we are seasonal workers, if the employer realises that you always take sick leave: “Darling, then you can stay at home, can't you?” In fact, after the injury they didn't renew my contract in that place. It is since that moment that I cannot find a job. Also because [they ask] “Where have you worked the last time?” “At the . . . [name of the hotel].” [then] they call them [and ask] “How is she?” “Ah, she's always sick, she got hurt twice.” And you are finished professionally. (Svetlana, 48 years old, catering and tourism)

Luca (a young cook who has worked in various hotels and restaurants) and Svetlana (a hotel waitress of Moldavian origins) recount how the tourist and catering industry is characterised by chronic undersizing and by unsustainable working conditions, in terms both of the intensity of the work and of the long hours worked. The employers' strategy seems to be to achieve a high productivity level while keeping constant the number of personnel employed, regardless of the workload. For example, during periods of the year that see the most intense influx of tourists, workers have to manage enormous work pressure without additional staff, by working longer hours and skipping breaks and days off. Thus, workers are forced to accept working conditions that are potentially dangerous to their health and safety. As well as the constantly risky conditions,

workers also have to deal with the blackmail to which temporary contracts expose them: Svetlana's story clearly shows how the right to sick leave, although formally guaranteed, is completely nullified by the perennial threat of losing the job and turns into a rare and exclusive privilege.

In the interviews with workers in the personal services sector, the problems with regard to sick leave for workers on temporary contracts and the fear of losing one's job are also raised, but so are problems related to the stress of working shifts and of discrimination due to national origin, which also relate to the construction of (un)safety in the workplace:

In my opinion, concerning health and safety, we are still tied to the matter of the temporary contract: everybody is afraid to lose their job and, then, they say nothing, perhaps they come with a touch of flu. . . . I have had first-hand experience of that: I had just started, I had a bronchitis and I have lingered on, as you always do, for fear that they say, "She is already in sick leave." . . . I think that there is this bad idea . . . also because nowadays the risk is indeed . . . in Italy in the labour market we are in an absolutely uncertain period and yes, we feel it: when you have a temporary work, you say, "No problems! It is all right," and you go forward. (Silvia, 45 years old, personal services)

When you sign the contract, they ask you to do night shifts. What do you answer, "No!"? Without shifts you're not stressed out. But if you have to work one, two, or three nights you can't get your strength back. It's work, not fooling about. And then even when you go to bed, you can't sleep for the stress of thinking about what you've missed, what you haven't done They give precedence as nurses to the Europeans. . . . For instance, I've seen one who was Bulgarian, and I'd applied to work full time. And they gave full time to her, though she came after me. And when I asked, they told me that their preference was for Europeans. . . . What can you do? You've got to keep your job. (Vittoria, 55 years old, personal services)

Silvia has worked mainly as an educator with people with mental disabilities and she has been injured three times in her career. Vittoria, the protagonist in the second story above, was instead a nurse with more than 30 years of experience. Nevertheless, this had not given her access to a permanent contract, nor to full recognition of her skills. Moreover, her status as a migrant worker—and furthermore from a non-European Union country—played a decisive role, despite her skills, (much more than her skills) in preventing her requests for greater contractual stability from being granted. This specific dimension of precariousness, and therefore of vulnerability, also forced her to accept a workload dangerous to her health, also in terms of work-related stress.

It emerges from these stories that workers in the care sector, regardless of the characteristics of the specific organisation concerned, are often particularly vulnerable—as has also been shown by previous research (Sargeant & Giovannone, 2011). Nor do workers who have long experience and are employed

by more structured organisations seem any better protected by work practices providing health safeguards.

As we have seen in the catering and tourism sector, in the personal care sector we can also see that the fear of losing one's job and the uncertainty that characterises the Italian labour market frequently force temporary workers to neglect their health. The fact that they could be easily replaced by newly hired workers makes them even more vulnerable. It also seems that the global economic crisis has increased the numbers of unemployed people who are ready to accept any job, and at the same time it has reduced the likelihood of finding new employment.

In such situations, it is difficult for temporary workers to negotiate their health and safety conditions:

It's true that if you have a contract for project work, you have less say in matters, you're less uppity. There's also a question of character, I think. Because when I've had to raise my voice, I've always raised it. . . . The psychological game is always the same: The head of personnel immediately works out how fragile you are; he'll try one, two, three times, and if he sees that you're giving in, he'll try to get you to do more days. . . . [We did] double shifts, understand? . . . For me [working extra hours] was routine. You don't get paid holidays, you don't get social security contributions, you don't get sod all. What do you do? Work more than the others! . . . It's obvious that contracts for project or freelance work are legalised extortion. (Anna, 40 years old, personal services)

When I came here [to Italy] I didn't know anything about my duties and rights as a worker; I had no idea about the sick leave. I didn't speak Italian. When my back has seized up, after three days I returned to work, even if I my back was still seized up, though I had the leave, as I didn't want to risk my job and I had no idea about what I could do. Then, with the time, I have learned about my rights, especially working in bigger places that allowed me to speak with other people. (Domitilla, 55 years old, personal services)

Anna was injured as an employee of an organisation for which she worked—for just over a year and for the first time in her career—as an educator in apartments for minors in difficulty. She said that having “less say in matters” and bad contractual conditions frequently exposed temporary workers to “legalised extortion.” It seems that precarious workers can only improve their work and safety conditions—and in particular reduce their workloads—through individual bargaining. But this dynamic increases their power asymmetry with respect to the employer, removing importance from the possession of recognised work experience. Domitilla—of Serbian origins, a care worker in a rest home—underlines the intersectional process of risk construction (Browne & Misra, 2003; Walby, 2007) resulting from the intertwining of two dimensions of vulnerability (Sargeant & Giovannone, 2011): having a fixed-term contract and being a migrant worker who has recently entered the Italian labour market. Her story shows clearly

how dangerous and even illegal working conditions can be socially, politically, and culturally constructed: the difficulties with a new language and culture, the limited social contacts, and the isolation from colleagues (or trade unions) come together to generate a dangerous situation and physical damage. Also Domitilla's situation (like that of Svetlana, the hotel waitress) doesn't allow her to gain real access to her rights as a worker; these rights remain on a purely formal level.

As noted elsewhere (Di Nunzio, 2011), precarious workers with little experience are more vulnerable than colleagues with permanent jobs because they are easier to replace or to blackmail. Contractual instability, moreover, restricts their opportunities to learn safe work practices. Working for different organisations, sometimes for very brief periods of time, thus seems to make precarious workers more exposed to risk, especially because of their difficulty in developing a solid set of skills. Nevertheless, even when precarious workers have acquired long and relevant experience, this does not guarantee them greater protection. The interweaving of temporary employment with other vulnerability factors—for instance, status as non-European Union migrants or as workers in a small organisation—seems to reduce (if not nullify) the advantage of possessing even advanced knowledge and skills. This interweaving aspect will be examined in the next section, where the analytical concern will be to grasp the elements of intersectionality (Browne & Misra, 2003; Walby, 2007) characterising the stories of injuries recounted by the interviewees.

Injury and the “Vulnerable Career”

After depicting the most salient traits of our collected data, in terms of working conditions and risk to health and safety, we now focus our analytical attention on the various interrelated elements that contribute to the construction of dangers and risks at work, turning the careers of our workers into “vulnerable careers.” In fact, the differences in terms of positioning and vulnerability in the work context are particularly striking when an episode of injury or work-related illness occurs. The single, concrete episode of injury must be interpreted not as an exceptional misfortune but as a sadly predictable final result, arising from the intersection of multiple dimensions of risk. In order to illustrate this aspect, we now move our analytical attention to two stories, adopting a different analytical strategy. Here we propose the analysis of entire work life stories, focusing on the accounts of two interviewees, in order to deconstruct the episode of injury as the final result of a sort of “vulnerabilisation process.” First, we present the story of Vittoria, a nurse employed on a fixed-term contract at a rest home. Vittoria was 55 years old when she was interviewed, she was of Albanian origin, and she had been resident in Italy for around 11 years. Second, we present the story of Gabriella, 66 years old, and at the time of the injury employed on a work-on-call contract as a cook at a small restaurant run by friends.

At . . . [rest home] I started to get back pain because there the work was different, because I had to lift the patients. . . . I had really severe lumbar sciatica. . . . I took cortisone and I was at home for two months. . . . The doctor wouldn't let me go to work because I couldn't walk, I couldn't stand up. And then I told my doctor, "Please say that I can go back to work" . . . because I was afraid that they didn't believe me, because I'd just started . . . [she then recounts that, despite the doctor's recommendation, she decided to go back to work] because we foreigners want to keep our jobs, do you understand? At all costs. Because you've come here to work and you must work. And then you don't care if you live or die. It doesn't interest me. Do you understand?" (Vittoria, 55 years old, personal services)

I slipped, I don't know whether [the floor] was wet, I only know that I slipped in the kitchen and banged my shoulder. . . . I was on my own. It was Thursday when I went to the doctor. He gave me an injury certificate, and I told him, "No, I can't stay at home, because on Friday, Saturday and Sunday I won't be able to find someone to replace me." And so I worked: I worked in June, July, August, and September, always with the pain. I went to the doctor, but they [the owners of the restaurant] underrated the problem. They said, "Yes, all right, you had a fall," and [gave me] all these fine creams and ointments and anti-inflammatory drugs. . . . Then I went privately to an orthopaedist. When he looked at the ultrasound scan, he said, "But what have you done to this shoulder?!" I had a snapped tendon and two damaged ones. (Gabriella, 66 years old, catering and tourism)

It is evident from both excerpts that the interviewees tried to ignore the problem afflicting them (as well as the physical pain associated with it, even though it was severe), and they continued to work despite the injury. These were indubitably situations of abuse by the employer. In Vittoria's case, the employer exploited her fear of losing a job for which she had only recently been hired, and her fear of not having her contract renewed and consequently losing her residence permit (which in Italy is conditional on employed status). In Gabriella's case, the abuse consisted in her inability to avoid heavy work commitments, despite the fact that her employers knew she had sustained an injury. This happened in a poorly structured work context that overlapped with the sphere of friendship. Gabriella was required to be constantly available for the restaurant, especially on its days of peak business. Thus, albeit in very different organisational contexts, the accounts of Vittoria and Gabriella both describe situations in which the employers failed to respect even the minimum standards in terms of employment rights and human resource management.

As vulnerability is constructed, the need to keep one's job even when it is detrimental to health and safety is more generally conditioned—as already shown—by one's work history:

Always, always fixed-term [contracts]. At first I also worked as an elderly person carer, so it was during the daytime. Then I worked at a pastry shop, then I was hired by the health spa at . . . [nearby town], and in the meantime I

applied for nursing jobs that matched my qualifications. I'm a professional nurse, five years of training and internship. Then always contracts for six months, three months, four months. I did three months, extended, 20 days at home, then again. . . . Thirty-three years of work, 20 at the hospital [in the home country], 10 here. Now I work part-time, three days a week, because there's no work. (Vittoria, 55 years old, personal services)

I've done everything and more. I've worked at the spa; I was a chambermaid. Then I worked at a herbalist's. . . . But my last job with a contract was in 1996. After that, what did I do? Some child-minding, so I was at home. . . . They asked me to come here because we were friends, and they knew that I'd always worked. And then I sincerely like cooking. Not that I'm qualified as a cook, mind you. The only employee was me, the others were the husband and wife, and their daughter. They were all family there, the only employee was me. I worked three years, four years in the kitchen, always with job-on-call contracts. (Gabriella, 66 years old, catering and tourism)

In the case of Vittoria, the interviewee was made vulnerable by various factors impeding her entry into the labour market and her continuance in it. The first problem was Vittoria's difficulty—as a foreign (and non-European Union) worker—in gaining bureaucratic recognition of her qualifications and experience. The second was her fragmentary work history, consisting only of short-term contracts and therefore of a “peregrination” around various rest homes in her area of residence, with no chance of stable employment. In the background to Vittoria's interview was her frustration (sometimes openly expressed) at the difficulty in having her skills fully recognised both institutionally and contractually. In the case of Gabriella, her vulnerability was mainly due to two factors. The first was the fragmentary nature of her previous work history, interspersed with exits from the labour market. The second was the absolute informality of her job, due to the amicable but ambivalent nature of the employment relationship and the family management of the organisation, but also due to Gabriella's lack of a formal qualification that could have been usable as leverage.

The precariousness of work and life due to the above-mentioned factors (fear of job loss, heightened by non-European Union migrant status; informality of the employment relationship; nonrecognition of qualifications; vulnerability to employer blackmail; deskilling) indirectly gives rise to physical vulnerability. In fact, both Vittoria's and Gabriella's stories recount situations of constant or prolonged exposure to the risk of physical harm. And sadly, the fears of these two interviewees seem to have been borne out, given the conclusions to both their stories:

After the illness they left me at home [a phrase meaning that she had been fired], totally! Some colleagues told me it was because I was a new nurse, understand? Because the promise was until October, because I was substituting for someone on maternity leave. And they'd told me, “Then we'll

renew it.” . . . But instead they didn’t. I nearly ended up under a bridge. . . . Nothing, nobody spoke to me, as if I’d never been there: nobody spoke to me! All the promises that had been made before, as if nothing had happened! (Vittoria, 55 years old, personal services)

I never heard from them again, nothing. . . . They told me it was something unusual, a freak injury! And she [the co-owner of the restaurant] also told me, “You wanted the injury, because you wanted to scrape up some money.” But not even when I took all the doctor’s papers: nothing! . . . In the end I chucked the job, also because they asked me to come here, to another restaurant, but I couldn’t work anymore because I couldn’t do certain jobs in the kitchen. So . . . the end, work finished. And also the friendship. That was it. (Gabriella, 66 years old, catering and tourism)

In both stories, the narrators highlight the greater insecurity of workers on temporary contracts compared with other workers. This insecurity concerns both health protection in the workplace and vulnerability outside it. Moreover, besides a precarious worker’s difficulty in asserting the right to health, there is also the ease with which an employer can discontinue the employment relationship—simply by not renewing the contract—after an injury. On the one hand, the promise of contract renewal—which had induced Vittoria to return to work despite her poor state of health and the advice of the doctor—was not kept. This happened, moreover, without explanations being given, producing a deep sense of disappointment and frustration. On the other hand, in Gabriella’s story it was the informal bond of friendship—which played such a large part in creating her work situation of ambiguity and risk—that was the first element to fail. Together with the friendship, the employment relationship also ended, and so did Gabriella’s possibility of working for another organisation in the same sector, owing to her irreparable physical damage.

Now that the key factors of vulnerability and insecurity at work described by the interviewees have been illustrated, the next and concluding section of this article draws on the interviews with the key informants to discuss possible policies to promote the quality of the workplace, the safety and the rights of precarious workers through better human resource management.

The analysis of the empirical materials has demonstrated that the safety conditions recounted in the various stories cannot be read along a single dimension (individual and contractual characteristics, organisational context, etc.). Rather, the construction of safety (or [un]safety) results from interactions among different intersecting dimensions of vulnerability that combine to produce safer, or conversely riskier, work environments and circumstances. This seems to apply both *ex ante*, when work is undertaken in unsafe conditions, and *ex post* in the management of an injury in the work context—above all with regard to the employer, and in the case of nonrenewal of the contract. The intersectional approach (Browne & Misra, 2003; Walby, 2007) has thus made it possible to conceive and interpret the risks to the health and safety of temporary workers in

terms of the concept of a “vulnerable career.” By this expression is meant the complex and variable interweaving of the conditions and the concatenated events (work and life history) that lead to the injury and its management. In fact, as shown by the injury stories collected, the critical factors do not conclude with the injury but continue in its subsequent management. Significantly, this too proves to be a major source of vulnerability (in terms of nonrecognition of both the risk and the lost state of health).

CHALLENGES FOR POLICYMAKERS AND HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGERS IN THEIR EFFORTS TO IMPROVE PRECARIOUS WORKERS’ SAFETY CONDITIONS

In light of the findings thus far, and on the basis of the interviews with the key informants, we now propose organisational actions with which to improve the conditions of vulnerable workers and transform precarious work into more secure work. One feature shared by the work stories reported in the previous section was the workers’ strong vulnerability to blackmail. This was confirmed by the interviews with the key informants:

For instance, at . . . [large engineering factory] some of the electric screw-drivers were broken. . . . The workers asked for them to be changed, and when the firm refused, they went on strike and got what they wanted. If they’d been precarious or working in a small firm with seven to eight employees this would have been inconceivable. . . . The only real measure, outside formality, is to make workers less precarious. Something that could be done immediately is introduce the minimum wage, so that if someone says, “I won’t work in these conditions,” they still have a wage. (trade unionist)

The vulnerability, in terms of health and safety, of workers on fixed-term contracts seems difficult to change without legislative intervention. As also suggested in the trade unionist’s statement, quoted above, it would first be necessary to redefine the criteria for access to welfare benefits in Italy. A step in this direction, for instance, would be the introduction of the minimum wage, which is present in different forms in all the European Union countries except for Italy, Greece, and Hungary (Berton, Richiardi, & Sacchi, 2009). It has also been shown that the minimum wage stimulates small employers to increase training and improve quality, as the means to justify price rises introduced to cover increased labour costs (Heyes & Gray, 2003).

In terms of the intersectional construction of risks, we also need to mention the issue of migrant workers, most of whom belong in the category of vulnerable workers, a category that is increasingly important in the labour market (Ambrosini & Barone, 2007; Giovannone & Tiraboschi, 2011). From the point of view of legislative measures, it would be necessary to devise a form of permission to stay that uncouples the residence permit from employment (TUC Commission on

Vulnerable Employment, 2008). Many migrant workers, in fact, are forced into vulnerable employment by immigration regulations. Revision of those regulations, with specific attention to areas where their impact increases the risk of exploitation, would make it possible to avoid situations where workers are susceptible to blackmail because if they lose their jobs, they lose their residence permits (Palidda, 2008; Sayad, 2008).

However, improvement of the health and safety conditions of precarious workers cannot be achieved by legislation alone. Trade unions and employers have an equally important role to play in heightening awareness of employment rights throughout the labour force, but particularly among vulnerable workers. They should work together to challenge vulnerable employment and to develop ethical employment initiatives such as corporate social responsibility practices.

As regards the traditional forms of worker representation, precarious contracts have indubitably had a decisive influence on the decline in unionisation rates, above all because of the trade unions' limited capacity for renewal and their difficulties in representing more problematic and heterogeneous interests. One therefore witnesses the progressive decentralization and individualization of bargaining (Barth, Roed, & Torp, 2002). As emerged from the interviews, this phenomenon is most harmful to vulnerable workers, among them those employed on temporary contracts. In order to intervene effectively in these matters, the trade unions should take responsibility for vulnerable workers and represent their interests as well as those of others. Unions should represent and organise all the workers in a workplace, regardless of whether their employment is permanent or temporary. Overall, they should focus on work sectors where exploitation is rife and where trade union membership is low.

The other front on which action should be taken to achieve improvements, especially in regard to vulnerability at work, concerns organisational and human resource management policies. These should target those particularly at risk by opposing the exploitation of temporary workers, especially in low-skilled sectors (Mitlacher, 2008). As pointed out repeatedly in this article and as stressed by several studies on the topic (Giovannone & Tiraboschi, 2011; TUC Commission on Vulnerable Employment, 2008), the experience and training of a temporary worker play an important role in guaranteeing suitable health and safety conditions in the workplace. In this regard, some of the expert trainers we interviewed suggested possible lines of intervention:

If someone is not provided with clear and constant information about the work that they must do, they can't thoroughly see and understand the protection measures. Either you have professional maturity and sufficiently strong experience in the sector to be able to adapt, or you risk creating confusion. Also consider how corporate practices are changing, or how protection measures are no longer the same. . . . Where can people on these kinds of contracts find places where they can get answers, support, protection,

and therefore also training? . . . If targeted actions are in place, I'm sure that work practices can be changed. (Trainer and safety psychologist)

When we train newly hired workers, we often have cases of people who've already changed jobs four or five times in the last two years, and who've had injuries. This happens because the workers have a bad organisational culture. For example, there's the use of IPDs [individual protection devices], which workers often decide not to use for fear of being teased and laughed at. It's obvious how negative episodes of this kind are. Work needs to be done on this. (President of a bilateral body)

These excerpts illustrate two factors of crucial importance for the construction of the vulnerability versus safety of precarious workers in organisations: (a) their acquisition of knowledge about and control over their jobs; (b) the organisational culture.

Temporary workers are marked by a twofold vulnerability in regard to these factors. On the one hand, they are vulnerable because of fragmented work careers that frequently lead to deskilling or perennial inexperience. On the other, they are vulnerable because of their peripheral position in work organisations (Quinlan, Mayhew, & Bole, 2001), which makes it very difficult for them to learn safe work practices and cultures, and also because of contracts that make them liable to blackmail (as highlighted by the story of Vittoria in the personal services sector, and that of Gabriella in the catering industry). It is therefore necessary to focus training programmes for temporary workers on two aspects. First, deskilling should be counteracted with programmes designed to enhance the skills and experience that have been accumulated over time. Second, workplaces should be encouraged to transmit organisational knowledge and a safety culture (Gherardi et al., 1997) that involves temporary workers as well as others. As shown by Mario's story, and as confirmed by the interviews with the key informants, the risks for precarious workers derive not only from inexperience but also from a "bad organisational culture."

The role of human resource management appears crucial in this regard. We know that the construction of a safety culture depends primarily on the investment made in it by the organisation's management and/or the employer. It therefore seems essential to invest in training also at the organisational level, promoting a view of safety not as a cost but as a resource. The same considerations apply more specifically to the safety training of temporary workers—which instead tends generally to be seen as a nonrecoverable investment (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2007). Among the possible forms of training provision, particularly suitable is the obligatory training encouraged by the European Council since the issuance of Directive 89/391/EEC, which was transposed into Italian law by Consolidated Text no. 81/2008 and by the subsequent state/regions accord of December 21, 2011. This training—provided by employers—could consist of modules designed, on the one hand, to furnish less

knowledgeable workers with skills relative to workplace safety, and on the other, to discourage the most experienced workers from reproducing risky practices that have become consolidated in particular occupational communities.

In addition—besides the themes of training and (in)experience—the research presented above has shown that vulnerability is constructed intersectionally as the result of an interweaving of conditions, characteristics, and situations that produces work histories that are vulnerable both in general occupational terms and specifically in terms of physical risk. Emblematic in this regard is the situation of migrant workers:

Training courses are useful, but on their own they are absolutely unable to ensure and protect the safety of workers. Safety culture is complex and multidimensional, and it concerns not only the relationship of people with their workplaces but also their relationship with themselves and with their lives. . . . Migrants are a category particularly at risk because most of them work in dangerous sectors and in manual jobs. A migrant is therefore by definition a worker who is worth little, and this devaluation is internalised. The problem is therefore how to implement real safety measures for people “of little worth.” (trade unionist)

Consistently with the culturalist approach adopted here (Gherardi, 2006; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2000; Turner, 1992), the trade unionist describes a safety culture as a multidimensional product whose construction involves diverse elements. Hence the right to safety is closely bound up with the worker’s perception of his or her vulnerability, understood as a set of factors that lead to the worker’s being seen as “of little worth.” The devaluation of the worker’s vulnerability—of which the treatment of migrants perhaps represents the most extreme example (although not the only one, as we have seen)—comes about on several levels—contractual, professional, organisational—and it generates a perception of workers as interchangeable, and therefore as easily blackmailed. As well as action being taken at the legislative level, already mentioned, the occupational segregation of many migrants can be combated by a style of management of human resources that recognises and values diversity. This would guarantee equality of opportunity and treatment, as well as making it possible to oppose the deskilling that often characterises the work histories of migrants, who are therefore more likely to be vulnerable.

In conclusion, this article has sought to show the distinctive type of physical vulnerability to which precarious workers are subject, both in the overall labour market and in individual organisations. The culturalist theoretical approach, as well as the direct encounter with the stories of precarious workers who have been victims of injuries, has yielded a nuanced representation and multidimensional account of such vulnerability. As we have seen, it cannot be accurately interpreted along only one dimension (contractual precariousness, individual characteristics, the organisational context, etc.). Rather, consideration should be

made of the intersections among diverse elements, which combine to construct what we have called “vulnerable careers.” From this perspective, physical insecurity is the outcome of a progressive “vulnerabilisation” of temporary workers in which important roles are played by (a) the macro level of policies and (nonexistent) rights; (b) the micro level of the individual organisational cultures in which precarious workers are embedded; and (c) the characteristics of individual workers (for example, as we have seen, migrant status, gender, etc.).

Hence, in order to reduce the extreme vulnerability of precarious workers, it is necessary, first, to devise social policies that make them less vulnerable to blackmail and allow them to reject particularly risky working conditions. Second, it is important to develop organisational actions that invest in the general development of work cultures that promote health and safety. More specifically, this organisational investment should encourage the collective construction of safe work practices and routines designed to counter the progressive precarisation of work. This process should include the construction of safe work for temporary employees as well as others.

NOTES

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