

The experiences and perspectives of agency social workers in England: Findings from interviews with those working in adult services

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Abstract: *One of the solutions to the shortages of social workers in England has been to employ social workers on a temporary or locum basis, often these social workers are called agency social workers as their contract of employment is with a employment agency rather than the social work employer. This paper explores the background to the use of agency social workers in the current context of government efforts to reduce the expenditure of public sector employers on agency staff. Data were collected through interviews with 40 social workers working with adults in England, in three diverse local authority settings; spanning those social workers whose careers in social work were in their early years; those with that were experienced and third group who while experienced and specialist were considering possible retirement or career moves. The aim of the interviews was to investigate motivations and experiences around this type of social work employment. The findings of the interviews are presented, with illustrations of 'push and pull' factors around agency working. The article concludes that agency working presents opportunities for social workers that may be within the power of social work employers to foster more generally, such as ways to minimise 'office politics' and to provide greater variety of work.*

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Introduction

There is increasing interest in social workers' motivations to enter and leave the profession. This lies in the context of shortages of social workers in many countries and of high turnover and hard to fill posts (see, for example, Wermeling, 2009; LG Improvement and Development, 2011; Marriott, 2011). Less commonly investigated are the experiences of social workers who work temporarily and their motivations. The profession, employers and the press do not always view agency social workers positively, seeing them sometimes as expensive and peripheral (for example, McGregor, 2010; West Midlands Social Worker Retention Project & TeamPro Solutions Ltd, 2011). Others depict agency social workers as pawns in the labour market, open to exploitation and working in conditions of uncertainty (TUC Equality and Employment Rights Department, 2007). The growth of agency working has been further described as the degradation of public service working in social work and nursing professions (de Ruyter et al., 2008). This article investigates the views and experiences of social workers who choose to work in social work posts to which they were recruited by an employment agency on a temporary or short-term contract basis, mainly working with adults, in England. Forty social workers at different stages of their professional career were interviewed to investigate their motivations, perceptions and practice experiences. Their accounts revealed a nuanced view of their labour market position; thereby eschewing a picture of them as liminal to the profession. At a time when the recession is reported to have made an impact upon adult social care expenditure and patterns of recruitment and retention (Acton Shapiro Consultancy and Research, 2010), it is important to understand the reasons why some social workers resort to or prefer to work for temporary employment agencies, despite the apparent greater security of employment and access to benefits, such as occupational pensions, that a permanent contract of employment with a local authority would bring. Furthermore, by concentrating specifically on social work with adults, this study contributes to the comparatively limited evidence base in this field.

Background

The concept of 'vulnerable employment' often uses the example of working temporarily for an employment or recruitment agency as typifying uncertainty and insecurity for employees (TUC Commission on Vulnerable Employment, 2008; Jayaweera & Anderson, 2008, p.21) although it is widespread in the United Kingdom (BERR 2008). As Carey (2011) noted, in relation to social work, tensions may emerge between employers' desires for more flexible labour, the ethics of practitioners and the needs of service users. Kirkpatrick et al. (2009) suggested that social workers who previously valued and sought standard (long term or permanent) contracts were now less inclined

to see these as always preferable to temporary posts. Their study of agency social workers in three case study sites in England, identified 'portfolio careers' and the 'free agent' perspective as being 'pull' factors, while attempts to escape from deteriorating conditions of work in public organisations constituted 'push' factors. They argued that an elite minority of highly skilled experts or 'gold collar' workers were able to secure benefits (financial and otherwise) by working outside conventional organisational hierarchies and in new relationships, such as consultancy. The social workers they interviewed, including those who were newly qualified, reported being able to greatly increase their income – by as much as £5,000 per annum – by undertaking agency work. Furthermore, some professional social workers may be in a very competitive position as 'gold collar' workers in areas where there are particular shortages of social workers or specific expertise. In their studies of agency working among nurses and social workers Kirkpatrick and colleagues (Kirkpatrick et al., 2009; de Ruyter, 2007, de Ruyter et al., 2007; Hoque & Kirkpatrick, 2008) have suggested that agency working in both professions represented a combination of 'push' and 'pull' factors, with deteriorating conditions and workload pressures acting as a push towards agency working while the prospect of better pay rates and better opportunities to work more flexibly often acted as a 'pull' into agency work. For those embarking on a social work career, Wallis-Jones and Lyons (2002) found that newly-qualified social workers have often used agency working as a way of acquiring the experience that will enable them to acquire a permanent post in the sector of their choice.

Since Wallis-Jones and Lyons' research, there have both been increases in the numbers of social work graduates in England (Moriarty, 2011) and a slowing down, if not reversal, of the expansion of social work posts, particularly in the local authority public sector. Some shortages remain, however, alongside persistent and widespread problems in recruiting experienced social workers for local authority or statutory social work (Local Authority Workforce Intelligence Group, 2007a, 2007b; Local Government Association, 2009). The Social Work Task Force (2009), a body set up to report jointly to the Department for Education and the Department of Health, the two central government departments responsible for social work services in England, and charged with making recommendations for reform of the profession, attributed this to a complex set of factors. These included the lack of a nationally agreed career structure for social workers, a failure to address issues of supply and demand, a lack of stringency in student selection procedures, and variations in the quality of some social work qualifying programmes. It reported that this leads to some employers concluding that some social work graduates are not appointable. Most of the Task Force's observations relate to the high profile shortages of experienced social workers in child protection work (see McGregor, 2011a). Such recruitment and retention problems are also reported in other developed countries (although similarly these are mainly in children's social work) such as the United States (Dickinson and Perry, 2002), Ireland (Burns, 2011), Sweden (Tham, 2007), and Australia (Healy et al., 2009). The present study is unusual in focusing on a range of social work activity

with adults, where shortages exist but are less frequently highlighted (Marriott, 2011).

In order to minimize the impact of vacancies on social work services and the exercise of their statutory functions, many local authorities, like other employers, engage professionals who are available for work on a temporary basis, often through an employment agency, generally but not always specializing in social work (Cornes et al., 2010).

Although newly qualified and early career social workers comprised a small proportion of the social workers interviewed as part of this study and more generally, there were important policy and methodological reasons for including separate information on their experiences of agency working and looking at their position. Research (Kirkpatrick et al., 2009; Morgan et al., 2007; Wallis-Jones & Lyons 2003) has noted the high number of newly qualified social workers choosing to work in employment agencies and suggested their motivations for doing this may differ from their more experienced counterparts. Kirkpatrick et al. (2009) found that agency work appealed to them as it afforded opportunities to explore different options and locations before opting for a permanent post. In a survey of agency workers in the West Midlands, influences toward agency work upon graduation were found to include higher rates of pay, flexibility of working, immediacy of employment, help in finding work, experience of a variety of settings and no wish for permanency of employment (Morgan et al., 2007). In Carey's (2006) study of 23 care managers one recently qualified agency social worker confessed an initial lack of confidence owing to what she described as the 'poor placements' she had experienced on her Diploma in Social Work qualifying programme. She felt that this problem had been quickly resolved after a year working as an agency worker because of the opportunities this afforded to work with so many clients, carers and other professionals. At the same time, some newly qualified social workers working as agency staff have expressed the view that it is potentially de-skilling because of the lack of access to training and the tendency to give agency workers the more routine office based jobs (Carey, 2007a; Hoque & Kirkpatrick, 2008). Wallis-Jones and Lyons (2003) suggested that newly qualified social workers working for agencies tended to be slightly older than their counterparts in permanent posts but were unsure whether this was because they found it harder to obtain permanent posts in their specialism of choice or because older recruits are more experienced and confident; thereby able to chose agency working as a way of increasing their chances of finding attractive new posts.

However, rather than seeing agency working as a solution to problems of workforce mobility, sufficiency and quality, the previous UK Labour Government cast it as a problem in the public sector. It advised (Department of Health/Department for Education and Skills, 2006; Department of Health, 2009) local authorities to review the proportion of their expenditure on agency workers, including social workers, as way of controlling expenditure (see Hoque et al., 2011). This was accompanied by concern that the quality of work undertaken by temporary members of staff might not always be sufficient, with arguments from some researchers that agency working itself

poses risks to service users (Carey, 2008). This parallels concern about the National Health Service's (NHS) and independent sector's reliance on bank or agency workers, both in respect of the sums of money involved but also on the lack of continuity of care for patients and service users (Manthorpe et al., 2012). There are now efforts to reduce overall expenditure on agency social workers. One reason cited for this is that local authorities see newly qualified social workers who are working for agencies as under-experienced, and hence, surely of no surprise, not able to manage complex case loads (see, for example, the West Midlands Social Worker Retention Project & TeamPro Solutions Ltd, 2011). Since its election, the UK Coalition government has not commented specifically on agency working but, despite criticism from employers' organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry, has allowed the *Agency Workers Regulations* to come into force. These specifically addresses the issue of when agency workers acquire the same employment rights as employees recruited directly by an employer. At the time of writing, it is not clear what effect this will have on the use of agency workers in social work.

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the variety of motivations to take up agency social work and to synthesise these as relevant to different stages of a career in social work. Motivations are further explored through accounts of practice. This paper breaks new ground by investigating these in the context of adult services in local authorities and in integrated teams. Specific research questions addressed in this paper are: whether motivations to work as an agency social worker vary by career stage and if so what are the implications of this for the profession and employers? These questions emanated from the published literature outlined above and policy discussions at the time of the study.

Methods

The study adopted a sequential mixed methods exploratory design (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2007) which is fully described in the study final report (Cornes et al., 2010). In the first stage, three local authority sites in England were chosen as case study areas and data were collected about their use of agency workers, supplemented by interviews with managers. The three areas selected were geographically diverse and had varying patterns of vacancies and turnover, they included an urban [outer London] council area with high vacancy levels (Site 1), a metropolitan council area with average vacancy levels (Site 2) and a rural council area with some specific hard to fill social work posts (Site 3). (Details of sites are anonymised to protect participants' confidentiality.) We then undertook in-depth qualitative interviews with agency workers from these three sites and nearby localities. These set the context for the final part of the study in which we surveyed all local councils in England, finding that while their use of agency workers was declining, many relied on them

to meet particular staffing needs. The data on which this paper draws are from the second part of the study but, as with mixed methods designs, their interpretation and analysis have been informed by all three sets of data.

The interview schedules were constructed drawing on themes, namely motivations and experiences, identified in the research on agency working reviewed prior to undertaking fieldwork. We interviewed 40 qualified social workers working for agencies who had been placed with local authorities or integrated (local authority and NHS) teams, for example in addictions services); comprising 17 social workers in mental health services (referred to as Mental Health Social Workers (MHSWs)); 13 social workers working in other roles in adult services (referred to as Social Workers (SWs)); and 10 newly qualified social workers (who had qualified in the last two years) (referred to as Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) (See Table 1). Although it is hard to determine career stage precisely, we classified participants into three main groups on the basis of their work histories – newly qualified or recently qualified social workers; those in the middle of their career and those still working at senior or specialist levels but who were thinking about eventual retirement or another move (see Table 2). Interviews were face to face in the main, with a minority undertaken by telephone at the participant's convenience.

Responses to the open ended questions were analysed thematically in order to identify the overarching themes and the frequency of each type of comment. The process of analysis comprised descriptive coding followed by interpretative coding in order to identify the overarching themes (Ritchie et al., 2003; King and Horrocks, 2010). This process was also guided by existing published research which was used to identify potential explanatory factors. For example, Giddens' structuration theory (Giddens, 1984, 1991) was useful in distinguishing between structural influences on agency working – such as, wage levels in the local economy and individual 'agency' or choices, for example, seeking more flexible hours than those available in standard permanent employment contracts or more conducive workplace relationships.

The most effective method of sample recruitment proved to be through 'snowballing' whereby one agency worker offered to introduce us to his or her work colleagues. While there are methodological limitations to this approach in that participants obtained through this method may show more similarities to each other than exist in the wider population, this technique is widely recognised as a legitimate and effective way of reaching hard to reach groups (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Becker & Bryman, 2004). Overall, the final sample covered a broad range of agency social workers working in adult services in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and area of specialism (see Tables 1 and 2).

Ethical approval for the study was secured from King's College London Research Ethics Committee and approval for the survey was secured from the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS). Permissions to undertake fieldwork in the three local authority case study sites were secured through their Research Governance Framework procedures or similar.

THE EXPERIENCES OF AGENCY SOCIAL WORKERS IN ADULT SERVICES IN ENGLAND

Table 1
Participants' work profile and gender (Social Work Agency Workers) (n=40)

	Female	Male	Total
Mental Health Social Workers (MHSWs)	9	8	17
Social Workers (not MHSW referred to as SWs)	9	4	13
Newly Qualified Social Worker (NQSWs)	8	2	10
TOTAL	26	14	40

Table 2
Participants' ethnicity, age (by age band and career stage) and work profile (n=40)

	Age 25-40 Newly qualified and early career	41-50 Experienced specialist or managers	51 + Experienced specialist or managers; viewing retirement or career move	Total
White British	1 MHSW 2 SW 6 NQSW	2 MHSW 1 SW	5 MHSW 2 SW	19
Asian	2 MHSW 1 NQSW			3
Black Caribbean/ Black British	1 MHSW 2 SW 1 NQSW	2 MHSW 2 SW	2 SW	10
Black African	3 MHSW 1 SW 1 NQSW			5
Other	1 SW 1 NQSW	1 MHSW		3

Some limitations of the research need to be acknowledged. We sought the views and experiences of a sample of agency social workers but there was no observation of practice or validation from their managers or colleagues. Participants may have wanted to present themselves in a good light and we may have recruited a narrow range of participants, despite efforts to recruit broadly. However, we were able to gain accounts from a reasonable number of participants (40), from different areas and in different employment positions.

Findings

The context of agency working

Most social workers interviewed did not regard agency work as a long-term career option; for some this was because they were seeking a permanent post, for others it was because they were looking over the short term.

With few exceptions, mainly among NQSWs who wanted to move to a permanent contract, participants in this study viewed their employment status as 'agency workers' in very positive, almost emancipatory, terms. The main advantages were seen to be its flexibility and choice over timing and location of work and, perhaps most importantly, the ability to 'escape' or re-position oneself within the sector:

There is the flexibility aspect. It's almost like being at a buffet. You can try little bits and different pieces... if you don't find it is for you or if you don't like the nature of the team you can make your excuses and move on somewhere else. (SW 20)

[Researcher: What attracted you to agency work?] You have much more control over your situation. To a degree, you can pick and chose... If the ship is not very nice you can just leave and walk away from it. You are your own master ...There are a lot of frying pans out there that are at boiling point and I am not going to walk into a frying pan and work myself silly for peanuts. (MHSW 15)

I had one particular assignment where I actually only did a few days [and left]. Unfortunately it was in Children and Families and that reinforced my view of Children and Families these days. I don't like it, it doesn't suit me and I am too old for it ... (SW 28, aged 50-60)

Significantly, what often seemed to translate the intention to go back into permanent employment into a job application was the perception of having found not just the right job but the right team and manager:

I am going now to work in a permanent position in a relatively poorly paid (local authority) but I like the job and the people and the managers; they are a great bunch of people; they are a bit of an old fashioned social work team but they do understand twenty first century social work, the post will be right for me, I know it.'(MHSW 23)

I have worked in some great teams and I have worked in some dreadful teams... I have had some good managers, some very good managers and some absolute stinkers. I fell on my feet here finding a good team and a very good supportive manager and the opportunity came up for permanent post and I went for it. (SW 20)

I got back into agency work (recently)... I wasn't very keen on the [first] placement. The

dynamics didn't suit me... I am not paid for office politics so I left... Then I came here. I really like this team. It is a lovely team and we all get on with what we have to get on with... I was due to leave but my agency phoned me to say [the team manager] is not letting you go... I am wondering if she is planning to offer me something permanent. (SW 22)

However, some agency workers who were working by choice as agency workers were re-considering permanent employment for fear that agency work might evaporate in the current financial climate of austerity in the UK. This was a particular concern for the MHSWs who feared that they might not be in such demand. They were aware that greater numbers of health professionals were being trained as 'Approved Mental Health Practitioners' (AMHPs) and who were able to undertake statutory mental health assessments, formerly the preserve of Approved Social Workers:

I am looking actually at finding a permanent job, I feel in the future with the training of new AMHPs the day of the agency worker will disappear. The market will be flooded which would force me to seek more full time appointment. (MHSW 13)

Despite these positive views, the next section reports elements of practice experiences that tempered their motivations to continue as agency social workers.

Practice experiences

There were commonalities in practice experiences that may explain why not all experiences of agency social work are entirely positive. All participants commented that they usually had little in the way of induction to their work:

[Researcher: were you offered any induction?] No. I was working within the first 20 minutes of arrival... In locum (agency) work you are not really assessed - you are just seen as competent and if you didn't perform well in the first two days then you would be out. (MHSW 7)

The extent to which training and supervision were offered varied from employer to employer. However, most of the agency workers felt disadvantaged in terms of not being able to access the same level of training and support as their permanent colleagues.

In practice, agency workers often felt that they were given jobs no one else wanted to do and that the amount of work they had to get through when compared to their non-agency colleagues differed. The form that this could take varied. On the one hand, one participant reported that:

Full time members of staff use and abuse us by giving us all the nasty horrible jobs and the clients they don't actually want to deal with themselves. (MHSW 16)

On the other hand, another participant commented that instead of being asked to do complex work, they might be treated as not being able to manage qualified work:

I have noticed with agency workers who I have come across who may be newly qualified... they are given all the rubbish to do. You know all the low level stuff, basically almost support worker type tasks. (MHSW 6)

ACAS (2005), the UK non-governmental organisation aimed at improving employment relations, has commented that differential pay rates between permanent and agency staff may cause resentments and so one explanation for providing unpopular work activities is that permanent staff may see this as a way of redressing the balance. Most participants in our study were satisfied with the level of pay that they received.

A small minority of agency workers reported it was difficult to integrate fully within the team and that they faced some resentment and distance from colleagues, as these different examples portray:

I felt that as an agency worker you're slightly detached from the team, you are not viewed as a permanent team member. I think that can have its advantages and its disadvantages. Certainly the disadvantages are that you don't feel part of the collective, you are not recognised as part of the team even though you are there and you perform your function and your duties. But on the plus side you tend to be less drawn into the politics of the team and the more difficult personal relationships that can occur. (SW 20)

A lot of the local authorities, they don't like agency workers, they need us but they don't like us. There is a lot of resentment about the money we get paid. (SW 21)

[Researcher: did they welcome you to the team?] Not as warmly as I would like but everywhere I go it is a mixed bag. I mean I am very work centred and sometimes you know I might have a little small talk with them, because I wouldn't want people to think I was anti-social, but I really am conscious I don't want to get into the office politics as to who likes who and who likes what, and management and whatever. (SW 22)

Agency workers felt they were likely to receive a more warm welcome where they helped relieve pressure on staff:

The team was not very organised when I first came and had a lot of problems. I think because they needed a locum worker they were more appreciative of me. (MHSW 14)

Indeed, a few teams were comprised mostly of agency staff:

The teams I have been in for the last couple of years have had a larger proportion of locums (agency workers) to permanent (social workers) so it hasn't been that difficult settling in. (SW 21)

Specific motivations: agency work as a professional stepping stone

It was evident that those social workers who had decided to work for an agency for want of a permanent contract, were not so keen on this form of employment. All the NQSWs spoke of their desire to find permanent employment as soon as possible, as this participant typically indicated:

I didn't really know much about agencies. I had heard bits at University but not a lot, so I basically did some research on the internet and found all different social care agencies that way...It was because there were no social work jobs around at that time, so really [I] didn't have much choice. (NQSW1)

Some already had experience of agency work through working as a care worker, or similar, often having been able to get part-time work in unqualified roles through an agency while studying. However, having employment was not the only benefit of working for an agency once qualified; several noted that it offered opportunities to accrue broader or specialist experience:

The pay is excellent and the freedom - especially as a newly qualified - to try something different and get a feel for where you feel best placed to settle down. (NQSW5)

The need to acquire experience in different specialisms was thought to be especially important for those who had not undertaken practice placements in the area in which they wanted to work. For example, one NQSW wanted to work in adult services but had undertaken practice placements in Children and Families' teams. Another did not want to move area and so was waiting for local vacancies to arise.

In contrast to the idea of agency working mainly being a 'retreat from permanent employment' (Kirkpatrick & Hoque, 2006), with one exception participants had either applied or intended to apply for a permanent post in the future, even if retirement was in view. This was despite the negative impact that they thought a permanent post would have in terms of their levels of pay over the short term. Permanent contracts of employment were thought to be preferable in terms of increasing work security, facilitating career progression or being settled, and reducing the time spent on travel. Social workers who were close to retirement or wished to reduce their employment hours were given as examples of those who might wish to embark on agency working but this was less of a 'retreat' and more of an option to vary their work commitments.

Discussion

This study confirms other research findings (Carey, 2003; Kirkpatrick et al.; 2009; Gamwell, 2007) in that most of the agency social workers interviewed in this study did not regard agency work as a long-term career option. In cognate employment areas, studies of agency workers working in nursing and social care support many of our findings. These include findings that there is a high level of job satisfaction to be gained from being an agency worker at a time of staff shortages; that most are satisfied with their pay; but wished their agency or host employer provided more training and support. While our study partially confirms Kirkpatrick et al.'s (2009) view that agency social work offers some escape from debilitating organisational conditions rather than a means to becoming a 'free agent', we found this was mediated by personal position and the level of choice over their work. What applies to NQSWs or to new migrants does not generally apply to sought-after and experienced mental health social workers (MHSWs), although at a time of widespread social work vacancies few of the social workers we interviewed experienced difficulties in obtaining the amount of work they desired. Overviews of the literature on contemporary social work, which often depict increasing workloads; resource shortages; constant reorganisations; policy changes; negative media portrayal; the falling value of pension schemes, high levels of stress and low levels of morale (Unwin, 2009), are not entirely reflective of all social work. While Evans et al. (2006, p.80) observed that many MHSWs feel overstressed, emotionally exhausted and undervalued, our findings suggest that some mediate this by taking up an agency position. However, social workers generally have reasonable morale especially if they feel that they retain some control over their work (Baginsky et al., 2010) which may be why some feel that being able to craft their own careers, not simply exit from the profession (Curtis et al., 2007), will enable them to remain as social workers through undertaking temporary or locum work.

While there was some element of 'escapism' and personal 'agency' in the accounts of agency social workers in this study, this seemed more related to certain team or organisational cultures rather than deteriorating conditions *per se*. Specifically, the accounts of agency social workers make references to poor management and '*office politics*' which might usefully be seen as a synonym for lack of team cohesion and imbalances. Indeed, more so than 'pay' or 'case load', these relational issues often emerged as the main reason why experienced social workers sought to re-position themselves within the sector: to 'go agency'. Carey (2011, p.12) has suggested that symptoms of psychological, emotional or physical detachment from employing organizations, colleagues or people using services may be experienced more by agency social workers than other staff. However, we found that agency work itself was described as a means of managing workplace and external relationships and emotions which are so important in social work (Morrison, 2007, p.25). A quantitative and sufficiently powered comparative study would be useful to investigate these hypotheses.

Our findings suggest that agency social workers are not 'a breed apart' but human services professionals moving in and out of permanent and temporary employment. The primary motivations for agency working varied between social workers at different stages of their lives and with differing financial and personal commitments. This was similarly found in de Ruyter's (2007) survey where nurses with permanent NHS posts were more likely to report money influenced their decisions to undertake additional work through agencies while nurses who solely worked for an agency were more likely to emphasize work-life balance issues and escaping 'office politics'. Some of Carey's (2007b, p.110) sample of care managers reported being able to negotiate formal and informal privileges or discretion which served as '*an antidote to, or a source of respite from, the sometimes debilitating impact of 'on the job' anxiety generated*'. Kirkpatrick et al. (2009) similarly portrayed agency work as a pressure valve – a method of recycling expertise by allowing those who are disaffected to remain in the profession. Importantly, agency work may offer a major stepping stone into the profession for those who are newly qualified (GSCC, 2011) or newly arrived to the UK (Hussein et al., 2011). Of those graduating in social work in England, the 2008-09 cohort, while 54 percent went straight to social work employment, 23 percent self-declared themselves as 'unemployed'; these may be prime candidates for agency work. Our findings that NQSW (and other) participants are not always able to access induction and training may not be good for these social workers or the profession overall. This fails to equip them with some of the basic building blocks necessary to support newly qualified professionals (Moriarty et al., 2011).

The contribution and motivations of agency social workers to the profession who are working temporarily for other reasons than dissatisfaction are often overlooked. This paper has shown that social workers in local authority adult services may be exercising some agency through taking up the opportunities of agency working as they stand on the threshold of the profession, or return from taking a break from, or begin to withdraw from full time work. The pressures of child protection or statutory mental health social work are not universally shared and if they are experienced as too damaging, then the option of agency work remains. If the opportunity of agency social work is to diminish, following concerns about its role and reductions in social work posts in adult services (Lymbery & Postle, 2010), there would seem to be a case for seeking to retain elements of its valued flexibility and opportunities to work outside one's usual practice or sector. This would appear especially relevant to those working in areas of practice of particular stress. Agency social workers are not marginal to the profession or in a liminal state of employment. Their experiences and observations offer some suggestions of why some vacancies persist and how social workers can be supported within the profession rather than seeing exit as the only possibility. It is in no-one's interests to depict agency social work as second class.

Conclusion

This study's focus on adult services enabled a close look at an area of practice which has been over-shadowed by concerns about children's services. Future research may wish to take more of a longitudinal perspective, observing what happens to social workers who move between different types of employers and change their employment status over time. Conceptualisations of what is meant by 'office politics' and investigation of how these can best be managed might be another suitable research topic since these were cast as a negative pressure by many participants.

Given concerns about social worker recruitment and retention in many countries, this study offers a new perspective about agency social workers in that it points to the heterogeneity of their motivations and experiences, some of which are related to the stage they are at in their professional careers and their different opportunities to exercise agency over their work choices. The study may have taken part at what will prove to be the zenith of agency social work; in that there are declining vacancies in England and possibly declining numbers of social work posts in adult services. These structural influences may limit the ways in which social workers can exercise agency. However, agency social work continues to offer opportunities for social workers at different stages of their careers to take up temporary positions, to gain different experiences, and to stay in front line practice, if they wish. It has value therefore in pointing to a possible lack of flexibility in current social work employment, to the debilitating effects of 'office politics' and the influence of perceptions of inadequate managers, and to restricted opportunities for frontline social workers in adult services to remain working directly with users and carers. Employers could usefully address these points when devising workforce strategies.

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