

Young, non-student workers in casual employment: A core-periphery examination of health outcomes

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ABSTRACT

From the 1980s onwards, Australia has seen an increase in peripheral forms of employment such as casual employment. Unlike 'core' employment, which refers to work that is ongoing and full-time, and which usually confers a range of legal rights and protection, most peripheral employment is not ongoing or full-time and has fewer, or no, entitlements. The core-periphery model suggests that because of this, peripheral workers are likely to experience poorer health than core workers.

This thesis tests the core-periphery model by examining if casual employment - the most common form of peripheral employment in Australia - is related to significantly different health outcomes than permanent employment. In order to add to current knowledge, this thesis examines this relationship amongst young, non-student workers only. This age-specific cohort is an important group of workers to examine because they are largely over-represented in peripheral forms of employment in Australia. Findings from the research are summarised in four manuscripts, each of which has addressed a distinct research aim/s.

Study One addressed two aims. The first aim was to understand if young, non-student casual workers were more likely to experience poorer health than young, non-student permanent workers or full-time students, using cross-sectional measures. A second aim was to understand if the relationship between casual employment and health was moderated by any individual-level variables (job insecurity, job dissatisfaction, financial strain, low social support). The results found no evidence of poor health outcomes in the casually employed group or that this relationship was moderated by the aforementioned variables.

The aim of Study Two was to examine the associations between different periods of exposure to casual employment and health outcomes. A three year longitudinal design was used to measure four employment paths, each which was characterised by varying periods of

exposure to either casual or permanent employment in young, non-students. It was hypothesised that paths characterised by longer exposure to casual employment would result in the largest health deterioration over time. The results did not support the hypothesis as longer periods of exposure to casual employment were not found to be related to poorer health outcomes. It was argued that this might be because young people working in casual employment are at a stage-of-life where the flexibility, higher pay and skills training which is often associated with casual arrangements, are considered beneficial.

Study Three aimed to understand if volition (voluntary or involuntary engagement in casual employment) could more sensitively predict health outcomes in young, non-student casual workers. This was approached within a 'relative deprivation' framework, where involuntary casuals were assumed to experience poorer health outcomes than voluntary casuals, or permanent employees, because of feelings of deprivation (wanting core employment and feeling as though they deserved it). However, casual employment was again found to be unrelated to health outcomes, even when casual workers disclosed that they would prefer permanent employment.

Study Four interviewed 20 young, non-student casuals and utilised qualitative analysis to understand how they appraised their work and health. The findings indicated that young, casual workers experienced many of the negative pressures outlined in research based on older populations; such as underemployment, financial strain and feelings of powerlessness. However, most respondents also identified some age-specific protective factors which they felt helped them to cope with the negative pressures. These included living at home and receiving financial support from their parents, as well as perceptions that they would eventually find more secure and meaningful work in the future.

Overall, this research programme did not provide strong support for the core-periphery model, which suggests that core workers should experience better health than peripheral workers. Instead, the quantitative findings indicated that the health of young, non-student casuals is no different to the health of young, non-student permanent workers. However, the qualitative study still identified some of the negative pressures associated with casual employment and the degree to which these factors led to poor health, predominantly stress. A brief discussion of why the quantitative and qualitative results did not align, are provided in the conclusion, along with some suggestions on how to regulate casual employment in Australia so as to better protect worker health.

DECLARATION

I, Natalie Matthews, certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My PhD journey can be best explained with two real-world analogies. The first is riding on a rollercoaster (*up....aaaaarrggghhhhh... doooowwn*). The second is child birth (*keep pushing, keep pushing! Almost there! I know it hurts, but push just a little harder!*) So, in light of this it is now finally safe to say that the rollercoaster ride is over; the baby has been delivered.

Of course, I was not alone on my PhD journey and have an endless list of people to acknowledge. There have been my friends who have provided my social support, my family who has offered unconditional love, my father who has spent hours formatting my entire thesis (any noticeable mistakes are his fault!) and SafeWork SA who provided me with financial support through the Work, Health & Safety Supplementary Scholarship. Then there has been chocolate, alcohol, my hairdresser and Netflix, all of whom have helped me to relax and indulge when the PhD rollercoaster was on a downwards trajectory, when the pushing became just too hard.

There are a few people, however, who deserve special mention for their time and generosity in helping me complete this thesis:

Paul (my supervisor)

I thank Paul for being such a committed supervisor, one who obviously genuinely cares for his students. Paul has always been very patient and helpful, even in the face of never ending questions and emails. His energy and sense of humour have worked to keep me motivated during difficult times. I have learnt a lot under his supervision and am grateful for how willing he is to share his time and expertise.

Tony aka SC

I thank Tony for letting me be a part of the School Leavers Project and for allowing me to utilise a dataset that he has put so much time and effort into over the past 10 years. I also thank him for so tirelessly editing my work, which has been full of grammatical mistakes (just to keep Tony on his toes). I am now wholly confident that my dissertation does not contain any split infinitives.

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Although Martha was involved mostly for my qualitative study, she has always been just an email away and ready to catch up for some debrief. I thank Martha for all those lunch and coffee dates where she has so tolerantly listened and provided great advice on all my PhD related - and even non PhD related - issues.

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The only thing as challenging as a PhD is show jumping! I thank my beautiful horse for allowing me to communicate with him free of the words or writing that often so overwhelmed me during my candidature.

THESIS STRUCTURE

This thesis describes a programme of research on peripheral employment and its association with worker health. It specifically examines one type of peripheral employment, known as casual employment, and its relationship with health outcomes in a cohort of young, non-student workers in South Australia. This is achieved through the examination of five distinct research aims that are contained within four study manuscripts.

Chapter 1 provides the definitions of frequently used terms in this thesis and outlines the historical development of labour policy in Australia. It moves on to summarise the literature on peripheral employment and health and describes the theoretical framework, known as the core-periphery model, which will be used to conceptualise the relationship between health and employment. This chapter also reviews the literature on this topic which indicates that current findings are inconsistent. This is attributed to research that hasn't been sensitive enough to the heterogeneity of peripheral employment, and its workforce.

Chapter 2 outlines the overarching research hypothesis, which is based on the core-periphery model. The hypothesis states that young, non-student casual workers will experience significantly poorer health outcomes than young, non-student permanent workers due to the less favourable characteristics of peripheral employment arrangements. The highly specific hypothesis, which examines only young, non-student workers in casual employment (and thus excludes older workers and all other forms of peripheral employment), is in response to the review in Chapter 1, which suggests that research should be more narrowly focused. Five specific research aims are developed, each of which independently assists in proving or disproving the hypothesis. In Chapter 2, each aim is presented and discussed in turn, and justified in relation to the relevant literature.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the data sources that were analysed in this thesis. This predominantly entails a detailed description of the principal source of longitudinal data used for the quantitative analysis, known as the South Australian School Leavers Study (SASLS). It also briefly discusses how the qualitative data (as used in Study Four) was collected. References are made to the Appendix section, which contains full disclosure of all the survey material and the interview schedule used in the last study.

Chapters 4-7 provide the findings of four separate studies, written in manuscript form. Each of the four manuscripts employs a different methodological approach to examine one or two of the aims outlined in Chapter 2. Although all analyses were conducted for the purpose of addressing the governing research hypothesis, each manuscript is considered to be a study in its own right and contains its own introduction, literature review and methods section.

Chapter 8 is the final chapter and is responsible for summarising the research programme. Each of the study aims and findings are re-visited and briefly outlined, and this is followed by a discussion of why the results of this thesis do not issue strong support for the research hypothesis. This Chapter proceeds to discuss the broader implications of this thesis, including insights into the theoretical and practical applications of the findings. Limitations of the thesis and directions for future research are provided.

The reader should note that the reference list for all Chapters is found at the end of the thesis, under 'Reference List' (starting on page 185). After the reference list appears the Appendix section (starting on page 195).

Format

This is a 'thesis by publication' which requires published, accepted or submitted manuscripts to comprise the research chapters (Adelaide Graduate Centre, 2015). This format was chosen to enable dissemination of the findings to occur quickly and efficiently, given the

need for more research on casual employment and health in Australia. Consequently, the research in this thesis is outlined in the form of four manuscripts, each of which is formatted according to publication guidelines. Currently, one manuscript has been published and three are under review.

Publications

Chapter 4: Study One

Matthews, N., Delfabbro, P., & Winefield, A. (2015). Casual catastrophe or contentment: is casual employment related to poor health in young South Australians? *Journal of Labour & Industry*, 25(2), 69-84.

Under review

Chapter 5: Study Two

Matthews, N., Delfabbro, P., & Winefield, A. Young, non-student workers in casual employment: A longitudinal analysis of health outcomes.

Chapter 6: Study Three

Matthews, N., Delfabbro, P., & Winefield, A. Is volition they key? Comparing the health of young, non-student casual workers based on voluntary or involuntary engagement.

Chapter 7: Study Four

Matthews, N., Delfabbro, P., Augoustinos, M. & Winefield, A. A thematic analysis of young, non-student workers' experiences in casual employment in Australia

Outline of Candidature

This thesis was completed as part of the Combined Master of Psychology (Organisational & Human Factors) / Doctor of Philosophy program at the University of

Adelaide. This degree incorporates a traditional three year PhD program with a two year Master program; this creates a combined degree that is four years in length. Thesis topics are required to relate to organisational psychology so that they can assist students in their practice as psychologists once registered. The following thesis is submitted to fulfil the requirements of the Doctor of Philosophy component.

Flexibility was a key factor in protecting jobs during the global financial crisis when, without the ability to reduce working hours, many firms would have had to sack employees. Far from being a source of insecurity, our changing labour market has provided the foundation for the nation's wealth to be shared more broadly.

Tony Shepherd

President of the Business Council of Australia

There is a message here for Australian business, which ignores the rise of insecure work at its peril. A business model that is predicated on short-term profits generated by widespread use of insecure work is unsustainable in the long run.

Brian Howe

Chair of the *Independent Inquiry into Insecure Employment in Australia*

Funded by the Australian Council of Trade Unions