



There's more to life than work

A qualitative investigation of transient employment

Joseph Conerton with Tina Lee's advisement



Introduction:

Hi, **I'm** Joe. Over my last pair of college summers **I've** held positions that were temporary gigs which transported me across the country. There were enjoyable and unenjoyable aspects about the positions but they were undeniably conducive to travel. I wanted to know how others who had worked these positions and the lifestyle that comes with them.

Literature:

While researching this culture I realized that they **didn't** fit molds that were laid out. There is a massive amount of literature on temporary employment. Much of which implicitly seems to focus on temp agencies and office work. When digging through literature there seemed to be an underlying theme which put temporary labor in a hierarchy and it was viewed as lesser than full-time **"permanent"** positions. In essence what this work says is that while some people may prefer temporary employment financially you are worse off and temporary laborers suffer more health ailments as well. There is more applicable information concerning the dichotomy between tourists and travelers. In essence travelers are seen as going on their own path and seeking a meaningful experience abroad. This dates to the genesis of tourism, the Grand Tour, and to a lesser extent the middle **class'** rough equivalent of tramping. Typically travelers are of middle-class background though they are living quite frugally while travelling. Much of the literature stressed travels outside of **one's** home country and there is a discussion of the benefits of immersing oneself in such a situation. In summation, my interviewees which reflect a transient seasonal or temporary employment do not fully mesh with previous research.

Methods:

This research is essentially an experimental dive into temporary transient employment. Nine interviews were conducted and all interviewees are friends who **I've** met through work the aforementioned positions and college. Semi-formal interviews ranged from 10-35 minutes though there was non-recorded catching up that occurred on both sides of the interview as often occurs with friends. Eight interviews were conducted on the phone due to distance with one being in person. Participants donned pseudonyms to conceal their identities and no specifics on employment locations are given.

Results:

Demographically, eight of my participants identified as white and one as predominantly Latina. All but one (who had a GED) held at least one degree or were working towards a degree be it a bachelors or masters. In addition, 2/3rds of those interviewed were women. On average these workers had worked between four and five positions that fall into the temporary category though there was substantial variation in this category (as could be assumed with the age range). Some workers had worked under the table positions for exceptionally brief periods and these were not included in the count (partially because the interviewees did not know the actual number). In addition approximately half of my participants had returned to a position for numerous seasons. Estimated annual income ranged from \$4,500 to \$25,000 annually the mean of which is just over \$15,000. A serious motivation for working these positions was to allow for travel.

Aardvark summed up the lifestyle best: *"You know **there's** a lot of jobs out there a lot of adventure jobs, a lot of education jobs, a lot of incredible job opportunities in just really fun and incredible places so **it's** nice to be kind of in the scene and circuit and find that.. being kind of on that thread and realize that seasonal employment its hopping and **you're** moving around a lot making connections, cutting connections off, lot of blah which is pretty tiring, but at the same time **it's** a little, kind of selfish but you essentially get to live that dream life, live what you want you know. People you want or experience what you want while still getting somewhat paid for it or you know scraping by."*

Bruce struck the positive note: *"**The** jobs have enabled me to have, like I said before, just months off and have that become the norm. Without that time available I probably **wouldn't** even imagine some of the trips that **I've** taken. You know, for a person who has a real job **it's** not even an option without quitting your job and turning your life around but for me **it's** actually really easy; **I've** got all this time that I can do what I want and go with it. **There's** a lot of room for creativity, certainly in the biking thing, which correlated to my interest in bikes and led to me wanting to take a bike tour. Now **I've** done two multiple thousand mile, multiple month long bike tours and yeah that is all only possibly because of the work for sure."*



There are plenty of drawbacks ranging from monotonous working, exploitative pay or conditions (in one case), and the lack of a constant friend group or long term relationship. In addition a number of participants mentioned the sour side of tourism:

Kali: *"**Yeah I'd** say just like any job in which you work for tips, like you start feeling like a prostitute after a while and you stop caring about the mission of the job that **you're** doing you know, like with guiding **you're** taking people on these natural history and whale-watching tours and your spiel became so much entertainment versus like I want to teach these people about the natural history of this area because I think **it's** important that they know, and want them to do something about it later, it was no; I want these people to give me money when **I'm** done with like talking to them for five hours. You just at some point lose the will... what **you're** saying loses meaning to you, it **doesn't** matter how much you believe in like teaching and educating about natural history if you have to say the same thing over and over again, day in and day out, it starts to mean nothing and **it's** all about the delivery and the jokes"*

Conclusion:

I feel that the fine individuals interviewed in this study should be entered into a new category defined as transient employees. These people choose to travel based on location and jobs. The job acceptance process is not simply based upon place but also the working details as well. This group is highly educated and currently flirting with the poverty line though averaging above it. Transient employment is not seen by most as a life-long plan with the concept of settling down happening in the late 20's to 30, or after one has spent at least a few years in this type of employment. There is a complete absence on literature that describes these people and the closest descriptions I could find are distortions of **Cohen's** drifters of 1972, migrant volunteers on kibbutz (Urieli and Reichel, 2000), **Pape's** nurses with the **'affliction'** of 'touristry', and **Riley's** **"long-term budget travelers"** of '88. That said, this study has serious limitations; there are only nine participants and they do not necessarily represent an industry, rather they are likely a niche of a niche. More research must be done to investigate subcultures of temporary workers if we are to have a holistic view.

Bibliography:

- Adler, J. (1985). Youth on the road. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 12(3), 335-354. doi:10.1016/0160-7383(85)90003-9
- Amit, V. (2011). "Before I settle down": Youth travel and enduring life course paradigms. *Anthropologica*, 53(1), 79-88.
- Cohen, E. (1972). Toward a sociology of international tourism. *Social Research*, 39(1), 164-182.
- Cohen, E. (1973). Nomads from affluence: Notes on the phenomenon of drifter-Tourism1. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 14(1-2), 89-89.
- De Beer, A., Rogerson, C. M., & Rogerson, J. M. (2014). Decent work in the South African tourism industry: Evidence from tourist guides. *Urban Forum*, 25(1), 89-103. doi:10.1007/s12132-013-9199-8
- Desforges, L. (1998). Checking out the planet: global representations/local identities and youth travel. In Skelton, T & Valentine, G (Eds.), *Cool places: geographies of youth cultures* (176-193). New York: Routledge.
- Kirk, J. J., & Belovics, R. (2008). A look into the temporary employment industry and its workers. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 45(3), 131.
- Pearce, P. L., & Foster, F. (2007). A "University of travel": Backpacker learning. *Tourism Management*, 28(5), 1285-1298. doi:10.1016/j.tourman.2006.11.009
- Virtanen, M., Kivimäki, M., Joensuu, M., Virtanen, P., Elovainio, M., & Vahtera, J. (2005). Temporary employment and health: a review. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 34, 610-622.
- Vogt, J. W. (1976). Wandering: Youth and travel behavior. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 4(1), 25-41. doi:10.1016/0160-7383(76)90051-7
- Yu, W., (2012). Better off jobless? Scarring effects of contingent employment in Japan. *Social Forces* 90 (3), 735-763.
- Walia, H. (2010). Transient servitude: Migrant labour in Canada and the apartheid of citizenship. *Race & Class*, 52(1), 71-84. doi:10.1177/0306396810371766

