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The Paradoxes of Contingency: Stories of Contingent Professional Tutors' Lived Experiences

Beth Sabo

Eastern Michigan University, bsabo2@emich.edu

Kaia-Marie A. Bishop

Eastern Michigan University, kbishop3@emich.edu

Kristine M. Gatchel

Eastern Michigan University, kgatche1@emich.edu

Rachel Dick

Eastern Michigan University, rdick2@emich.edu

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The Paradoxes of Contingency: Stories of Contingent Professional Tutors' Lived Experiences

Beth Sabo

Kaia-Marie A. Bishop

Kristine M. Gatchel

Rachel Dick

(Eastern Michigan University)

Abstract Despite comprising the majority of labor in higher education in general and writing centers more specifically, contingent workers' voices and experiences have often been overlooked. The contingent voices that have been represented have predominantly been those in director or administrative positions, not the professional tutors who engage in centers' day-to-day consulting. This lack of representation in the literature perpetuates institutional inequities and belies a larger paradox: that contingent workers attempting to ameliorate the precarity of their situation may jeopardize their livelihood. Because contingent workers' identities and roles have historically been ignored and marginalized, few research and publication options are available to them. For this reason, this research used autoethnography, one of the only methodologies available to the contingent professional tutor authors that allowed us agency to share our lived experiences and identities as contingent workers. Three themes emerged from our autoethnographies: vital to but not valued by the institution, working to live but destroying the body, and the illusion of choice. After discussing themes, we call for a continuation of what this work begins, particularly that the field of writing center studies should aim for wider representation of contingent and multi-identified voices in its literature, conferences, and leadership organizations.

Keywords contingency, contingent, autoethnography, professional tutor, paradox

In our writing center at a public R2 university in the United States, contingency has multiple faces. All of our consultants are contingent employees, including undergraduate peer tutors, graduate assistants, and part-time lecturers. Beyond student or employment status at the university level, contingent writing center workers hold identities and lived experiences that are not always visibly apparent, such as age, marital/relationship status, sexual orientation, neurodivergence, experience with

mental health issues, and country of origin, to name just a few. These different lived experiences and intersectional identities may reflect the population of writers with whom we work, allowing us to build trust and rapport. Hence, the ability to effectively serve writers is dependent on the multi-identities of our contingent workers. Despite this value, the voices and experiences of contingent workers from writing centers such as ours are often unheard and overlooked. Given this gap in knowledge,

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this paper uses autoethnography as a way to make sense of our intersectional, lived experiences as contingent workers in the writing center. Three key themes emerged from our autoethnographies: vital to but not valued by the institution, working to live but destroying the body, and the illusion of choice. These themes illustrate our experiences of the paradoxes inherent in being considered contingent. By considering these paradoxes, this study offers insight into the complex interactions between the identities and lived experiences of those who do much of the labor of writing centers. We write this with the hope that such exploitative practices will be brought to an end in higher education.

Literature Review

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics defines contingent labor broadly as “people who do not expect their jobs to last or who report that their jobs are temporary. They do not have an implicit or explicit contract for continuing employment” (Kosanovich, 2018, n.p.). In 2017, 5.9 million working individuals in the United States were categorized as contingent, nearly 4% of the labor force. Higher education, however, reports a much higher percentage of contingent workers than the overall workforce, with an average of 73% of instructional positions across all types of higher education institutions being filled by contingent workers in 2016 (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 2018). The percentage of contingent workers filling instructional positions varies across different institution types, with 2-year institutions more heavily relying on contingent labor than 4-year institutions do. Likewise, R3 institutions use more contingent labor than R1 institutions do (AAUP, 2018; Finley, 2008). The National Center for Education Statistics (2023) reported that in 2021, at the authors’ R2 institution, part-time employees made up 43% of our instructional faculty, although it is not clear who was and was not counted as “part-time.”

This confusion stems from the fact that within higher education, a wide variety of terms can be used to categorize contingent

employees’ employment status, such as non-tenured full-time, adjunct, part-time, professional tutor, peer tutor, graduate assistant, and teaching assistant. The meaning of these terms can vary in different contexts, such as an institution differentiating between adjunct and part-time lecturers whereas other institutions may use only one or the other term. These differentiations may or may not include length of contract term, eligibility for rehire, benefits, compensation rate, union representation, and process to promotion, among other distinctions. The variability of both terminology and definitions makes comparisons challenging.

That challenge is not the only reason why contingent labor, though usually comprising a large percentage of the workforce at any given institution, is often disregarded. The gender disparity in contingent labor in higher education is noteworthy, where women are “10 to 15 percent more likely than men to be in these [contingent] positions” (AAUP, 2005, as cited in Finley, 2008, n.p.). As Ashley Finley (2008) argued, this disparity results in the feminization of contingent labor wherein the work is devalued, and the workers who do it are marginalized. Similar to the link between contingent status and gender, it stands to reason that contingent status and other marginalized identities may also be connected. Those contingent workers who hold multiple marginalized identities may experience even further marginalization.

To understand the connection between contingency and identity, it is worth considering what identity is. James Paul Gee (2000) argued that identity is “an important analytic tool for understanding schools and society” and defined it as “being recognized as a certain ‘kind of person,’ in a given context” (p. 99). Identity is partly shaped by relatively stable aspects, such as temperament, which Gee referred to as a “core identity” (p. 99). However, since identity is socially constructed, contextual, dynamic, multiple, and contradictory (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Ivanič, 1998; Matsuda, 2015; McCarthy & Moje, 2002), it is also fluid. Because of this, it can shift through interactions with others or changes in context.

Within the context of writing centers in higher education, the racial/ethnic identity of

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the White¹ women who largely staff these centers does not marginalize them. However, that these individuals are both women and contingent is two marks against them, and that is without even considering additional identities they may hold that may further marginalize them. (For further discussion of intersectionality and identity, see Kimberle Crenshaw, 1991). As Harry C. Denny (2010) has pointed out, the nature of writing center work forces “writing center professionals [to] continually confront our marginality” (p. 97). Hence, the time has come to take an honest look at the intersections between identities, contingency, and the writing center.

This autoethnography is needed precisely because “contingency as a work status remains dangerously invisible in the field of writing center studies” (Fels et al., 2021, p. 353). This invisibility is not because contingency does not exist in the field (despite there being no large-scale numbers to cite); it is because the contingent workforce of writing centers has not been widely represented in the literature. While some, such as Dawn Fels et al. (2021), have begun to bring contingent voices and issues into the literature, those voices have still largely belonged to writing center directors, and these discussions have not delved far enough into the intersections between identity and contingent writing center work. Searching the archives of the major writing center journals for related literature shows the incredible dearth of research focused on the experiences and identities of contingent professional staff of writing centers. Hence, the purpose of this autoethnography is to remedy that by adding our voices to describe our experiences of being multi-identified, contingent professional tutors. It is a terrifying purpose as, existing already on the edge of the profession, we risk our very livelihood to do so.

Methodology

Qualitative research allows for an in-depth exploration of people’s experiences, culture, and relationships, as well as their meaning-making of these experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is also humanizing in a way that

quantitative research is not. Given the gap in knowledge about the experiences of contingent workers in writing centers, a qualitative approach allows us to shed light more fully on the lived experiences of contingent workers. In qualitative inquiry, individuals who have been pushed to the margins can share their own experiences rather than being spoken for by others or being silenced (Jehangir, 2010). This makes qualitative research a space where contingent writing center workers’ voices can be shared.

Autoethnography specifically allows for resistance to more traditional methodological approaches and the status quo (Ellis et al., 2011), and since our institution does not allow part-time lecturers to do human subjects research on our own, this was one of the few methodologies available to us that allows us full agency. Thus, autoethnography enabled us to share our experiences as contingent writing center workers while also claiming our agency. Moreover, this methodology is simultaneously a process and a product (Ellis et al., 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), like the writing with which we work. This is in part because autoethnography combines elements of autobiography and ethnography “to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 1), both of which require reflection. The stories we shared allowed us to make sense of both our lived experiences and the writing center culture in which we work.

Combining the elements of autobiography and ethnography was done by critically reflecting on our own lived experience as contingent workers in the writing center in relation to the larger systems in place in higher education institutions. Theorizing in this way allowed us a deeper understanding of our lived experiences and the lived experiences of others around us. bell hooks (1994) explained that the knowledge gained from this practice “emerges from the concrete, from my efforts to make sense of everyday life experiences, from my efforts to critically intervene in my life and the lives of others” (p. 70). This theorizing allowed us to make sense of both our personal and collective experiences by

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bringing our multiple intersecting identities into conversation and recognizing commonalities around these experiences.

As this method focuses on the positionality and experiences of the researcher, our understanding of our lived experiences in relation to social structures was influenced by standpoint theory. As discussed in the literature review, most literature on contingent writing center staff has focused on directors and has left out the voices of those who make up the majority of staff in writing centers, the tutors. However, as Sandra Harding (2008) explained, “the experience and lives of marginalized peoples, as they understand them, provide distinctive *problems to be explained* or research agendas that [often] are not visible or not compelling to the dominant groups” (p. 334). Thus, “the standpoint of some particular marginalized group can point the way to less partial and distorted conceptual frameworks, methods, rules, and procedures of inquiry” (p. 333). This is why including contingent voices in our literature is crucial in gaining a more holistic view of the impact that working in the writing center has on the lived experiences of its staff.

Data Collection, Analysis, and Trustworthiness

Conversations and reflections with each other elicited what we each wanted to share in the stories of our personal experiences as contingent workers in a writing center. Then, we read, coded, and discussed the stories collectively; through discussing the codes, patterns across the stories became clear and led to emerging themes. Since this research focuses on our lived experiences as contingent workers, we used in vivo coding to capture the actual language used (Saldaña, 2016) in the stories to describe our experiences. Examples of this include “forces me to choose,” “treated as expendable,” and “out of my control.” We also coded for beliefs given the additional focus on identities as contingent workers (Saldaña, 2016). Beliefs coding encompasses attitudes (how we think or feel about something), values (the importance we attribute to something), and “our personal knowledge, experiences, opinions, prejudices, morals, and other

interpretive perceptions of the social world” (p. 132). Examples of this include beliefs about the expectations of others and beliefs about the necessity of our work for the institution.

In qualitative research, researchers act as the “instrument” for data collection and analysis, and this methodology, therefore, relies on rich description to inform our understanding of participants’ lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers need to interpret this data in ways that support trustworthiness. In this study, trustworthiness was supported by multiple researchers consensually validating themes across participants (Eisner, 1991). Since the researchers were also participants, we used member-check to ensure findings aligned with participants’ lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This triangulation strengthened the trustworthiness of this study. Furthermore, some ethical considerations directly impacted us. Given our status as contingent workers, we felt we had to carefully construct our stories because of our concerns about potential consequences in our professional lives. While we four authors wrote the following stories, we still use pseudonyms rather than our names on the stories to provide some anonymity and address this concern. As in other qualitative research, we had the right to withdraw from participating at any time.

Our Stories

We are four White women ranging in age from 29 to 42 years working as contingent professional staff at a writing center for a public R2 university in the United States. All of us have been staff at this writing center for at least six years. We have served in various contingent writing center staff positions; two of us began as undergraduate peer tutors, served as graduate assistants, and are now part-time lecturers, and two of us began as graduate assistants or interns and are currently part-time lecturers. Our writing center serves undergraduate students, graduate students, and staff and faculty of the university across various locations known as satellites, which are housed in specific colleges, meant to support writers in those disciplines. In addition to this primary

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role of working one-on-one with writers, all of us have also served as a satellite coordinator, which entails additional responsibilities, such as promoting writing center services and managing other consultants. While the coordinator position comes with additional expectations, it is still a contingent position, and we receive no additional compensation. In addition to our work as writing center staff, all of us have served in other contingent roles on campus, including as instructors of courses in various fields of study. Following are stories from each of us (using our pseudonyms) about our experiences working as contingent professional staff at our writing center.

Tina

In my mid-20s, I divorced my emotionally abusive husband. After the divorce and a few years of living on my own, I felt confident enough to go to graduate school, a dream that my ex-husband had always told me was ridiculous because, according to him, higher education would be wasted when I was the obedient stay-at-home mother he imagined I would become.

Graduate school involved a full-time graduate assistantship (20 hours/week) teaching first-year writing and working in the writing center. It also involved simultaneously completing two different master's programs while working two additional part-time jobs (15 hours/week each), attempting to keep up with the onerous financial debt from my failed marriage, and grieving all of my grandparents' deaths and my own parents' divorce. Even with all of these jobs, I still required food stamps to afford to eat. I had so much work to do and so many bills to pay that I did not have time for the mental breakdown I always felt on the cusp of and had a history of.

After graduation, I became a part-time lecturer, each semester working five 10-hour per week contracts, which was the maximum amount the institution allowed. I also continued to work one part-time retail job (15 hours/week during the semester and 40 hours/week on breaks) until the COVID-19 pandemic permanently shuttered the store, and I took on freelance work, when possible. I had no health insurance, and my

car (a lemon my ex-husband had insisted we buy to fill with the children we never had) was constantly breaking down.

When the institution cut all part-time lecturers down to four 10-hour per week contracts, I lost 20% of my income and had the added cost of health insurance purchased from the marketplace, but I was able to afford to go to the dentist for the first time in 5 years. When I required extensive oral surgery necessitated by my years of not being able to afford to go to the dentist, I did not have time off from work to recover and returned to work black and blue, swollen, drooling, sore, and hungry as I could consume only liquids for two weeks.

My 10 years of being a part-time lecturer have involved accepting the full number of contracts I am allowed to take every semester (yes, including summer), and I recognize that I am lucky to be offered those contracts when many of my colleagues struggle through summers. I work year-round with graduate student and faculty writers, so the writing I support is largely theses, dissertations, manuscripts, grant proposals, and conference presentations. These are high-stakes pieces of writing that are publicly published and/or that bring visibility and grants to the university, yet I have to sign new contracts every semester to continue this valuable work. I have achieved some measure of success despite being contingent, but my experience of being contingent is still one of food and job insecurity, poor compensation, and lack of benefits, all of which has meant I cannot afford to start a family, something I desperately want. Now in my 40s, I have little time left to do so biologically.

Lauren

In my current positions on campus, as a contingent part-time lecturer and writing consultant, most assume I am an able-bodied, neurotypical individual. This is far from my reality, yet I find it difficult to show up as my disabled, neurodivergent self. Understanding the reason for this difficulty requires me to acknowledge the ways in which much of my disabled positionality is also a direct result of the impact capitalist systems and institutions, including

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higher education, have on the bodies of real individuals, especially those who are often in some of the most contingent positions.

While attending graduate school full-time, I had five jobs on campus—two of which I was not monetarily compensated for yet was “happy” to have nonetheless because of the experience I would gain. Despite the experiential benefits, this excessive workload, coupled with my already existing mental health conditions, culminated in a pressure to continue performing and producing for the sake of my “success” and “productivity,” and, ultimately, obliterated my health and immune system, resulting in the onset of multiple chronic health conditions, along with other psychiatric and cognitive disorders. This onset of illnesses, and the side effects of the treatment required, was severe enough that I was unable to work for a year, was wheelchair bound at times, and often had to be spoon-fed by my partner when my body became too weak for me to lift my own arms.

I am now “better enough” to get back to participating in capitalism, but I am still very much disabled. I may not *look* much different to those who knew me before the onset of most of my disabilities, but I definitely *feel* very different, *interact* with the world differently, and *process* things in different ways. This can be confusing, both to those who knew me prior to the onset of these disabilities, and to those who perceive me as being able-bodied and neurotypical since my conditions are, for the most part, invisible.

The worry that I may have to repeatedly disclose, explain, or justify my identities, especially in a professional setting, to those who may not even believe me in the end is taxing. The amount of stigma associated with neurodivergence and mental health conditions, especially those considered to be “more severe” by general society, pushes me to continue trying to mask my symptoms in order to pass as neurotypical. The fear of being replaced with someone who is viewed as more “reliable,” “on time,” “organized,” and “prepared” often leads me to take on more than I should. Furthermore, the fear of being told I am overexaggerating or making things up results in my simply trying to pretend these identities don’t exist in professional settings.

The complexities of the intersection of these identities with being a contingent worker are difficult to make sense of. On the one hand, because of the unpredictable nature of my chronic health conditions, I appreciate the flexibility I have as a contingent worker. On the other hand, the sociocultural impact of being contingent perpetuates many of the same societal conditions that brought about the onset of some of my disabilities in the first place.

Having the flexibility to take one or two contracts less in a semester if I need to focus on my health is a huge benefit, but it is one that comes at a financial cost. The economic instability this creates directly affects my mental health and stress levels. It forces me to choose between showing my value as a productive employee, engaging in professional development opportunities I’m passionate about, and not doing too much for fear of becoming sick again as a result.

Andrea

My work in the writing center began in an unconventional way at our institution. Rather than join through a training course as an undergraduate student, apply as a graduate assistant working on an MA, or be appointed as a part-time lecturer, I designed a fall semester internship for myself as part of my PhD program. I participated in both the undergraduate and graduate trainings and attended part-time lecturer meetings. I was already working other contingent positions as a graduate assistant elsewhere, teaching composition part-time at another local college, and working retail seasonally, so I expected this to be contingent and temporary work and was not surprised that there was no need for me in the winter semester.

I was asked to return in the fall, however. I have always had a unique role in the writing center, which has meant I have had the opportunity to explore many different elements of writing center work—but so has the contingency of my work. I never know whether or not I will be employed as a consultant the following semester, much less in what role. I’ve worked as an undergraduate consultant, satellite coordinator, and graduate/faculty

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consultant; conducted literature reviews; led workshops at the undergraduate and graduate levels; developed specialty workshops for PhD students; and hosted a biweekly faculty writing circle. While I delight in continuing to grow and be engaged in my writing center work, all this uncertainty is terrifying.

This terror is compounded by other aspects of my identity. I am neurodivergent, and I share this information when I feel safe to do so (but this is not always true). Neurodivergence in the writing center can be stigmatizing and challenging, both for consultants and writers, but also means I have strengths that others don't. For example, my ability to see patterns and make connections that others don't often helps people see their writing, content, teaching, and/or consulting in new ways that help them grow in their roles and as humans. But as a contingent worker, I don't have enough time to give to be able to improve experiences for neurodivergent people in our spaces in the way I'd like to, and this is made more difficult with the high turnover rate of writing center workers. I am also chronically ill, and during a time of dangerous politics and COVID-19, precarious work without affordable and comprehensive coverage is dangerous for my health and well-being. Of course, my privilege as a White person allows me more access to support.

I'm currently (happily) employed full-time in another field and continue to work as a writing consultant, although I've left my positions in teaching and retail. Balancing my full-time position with the scheduling demands of graduate student and faculty writers is stressful and tricky. But without the additional stress of my only income coming from multiple, part-time, contingent, sometimes competing positions, I am more able to fully enjoy the work I do as a consultant. Despite this, I do still feel the impacts of contingency because the work is not guaranteed. I need this income to afford to survive, but I also need this work because of the joy I get out of working with writers. This work is vitally important to who I am as a person, but my institution treats my work—myself—as expendable. When you are cobbling together multiple positions where you are treated as expendable, when you cannot

fully appreciate the joy in what you do because of the stress that merely existing in our capitalist society brings, how can that not profoundly affect your identity as a human being?

Isabel

Seven years ago, I took a leap of faith; with my youngest child ready to attend kindergarten, I decided it was time to go back to school to complete my bachelor's degree. It didn't take long to remember how much I loved academia. A master's degree (along with the need to move my family of four to a different city so that I could be closer to campus to be a graduate assistant and continue to work in the writing center) was the logical next step. I was weeks away from graduating; my thesis was written and published, I was slated to present at a few conferences, and there was hope that I might be offered a few sections of first-year writing and/or a job at the writing center in the fall. I was even considering what it might look like to go on for my PhD. That was in March 2020.

As it did for millions of others, the world as I knew it collapsed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Yes, I still earned my degree. But there was no graduation or celebration, no academic conferences or presentations, and what higher education would look like in fall 2020 was anyone's guess. The unknown was debilitating; as an individual who has lived with severe anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder for the majority of my life, my mental health declined rapidly. With everything seemingly out of my control, I returned to a former method of control—disordered eating. I suffered a severe relapse of an eating disorder I had been battling for over a decade. By June, my physical health was extremely compromised, and my mental health wasn't any better.

At this nadir, I received a surprising phone call, an offer to do some contingent work with a new organization supporting activism and advocacy through teen writing. That was a catalyst. I knew if I wanted to continue to work, returning to my recovery process was necessary. It also served as a reminder that all hope was not lost if I was able to continue to do work that I loved, even if I wasn't sure how long it would last or what might come next.

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That work did eventually lead to a satellite coordinator position in the writing center and classes in the first-year writing program on a semester-by-semester contingent basis. By winter, I had also become extremely involved in the new community writing resource that had been created out of the campus writing center. As I proved myself capable, I was given additional responsibilities and opportunities. I was even given courses in my field of study, the culmination of the dream that had begun early in my return to undergrad.

Eventually, I had more work than I could handle in my contingent position, meaning I had to think carefully about which positions to accept or turn down. Fully recognizing my privilege to have such a dilemma, too much to choose from was as overwhelming as not enough. I worried (and continue to worry each and every semester) about what saying “no” to something might mean for me long-term. The university’s need for me to work the maximum number of positions each semester and yet still consider me “contingent” as a part-time lecturer is a frustrating paradox. I am working more than many full-time employees, but without the benefits or job security. Every single semester, I wrestle with questions, such as: If I turn down a section of teaching this semester, will the department hire me back next semester? What happens to the trust and rapport it took me weeks to build up as an embedded writing consultant with an at-risk group of students if I’m not in that role next semester? Just because I am blessed with this abundance of possibilities now, if enrollment continues to plummet, what does that mean for me and my family?

All of this uncertainty often leads to my saying “yes” and taking on far more than I should. I say yes to the extra, often uncompensated, work because I am worried that if I don’t, someone else will. If I’m not able to “prove” my value, I am expendable. The offer of contingent work in the summer of 2020 literally saved my life. Now, as much as I love all my work and am so grateful for each opportunity, it is also taking me away from my life outside of that work. I don’t regret my initial leap of faith seven years ago, but I often wish I didn’t have to continue taking one every single semester since.

Discussion of Themes

The themes that emerged from our stories illustrate the many paradoxes of contingent labor. Recognition that we are vital to but not valued by the institution was an overarching theme across all of our stories. Another particularly impactful way being contingent shaped our stories was the effect this work has on our bodies and minds. This impact is explored under the theme working to live but destroying the body. A final theme that emerged from the data was the illusion of choice, which examines the double binds we face, where regardless of what we choose, the outcome is less than ideal.

Vital to but Not Valued by the Institution

Our stories described our lived experiences as contingent workers as vital to the basic functions of the writing center, while also being expendable and not feeling valued by the institution. We shared that we are regularly asked to take on a variety of roles and have had to sometimes make careful choices about whether or not to accept a contract while considering how that might impact us in the future. The descriptions of our experiences of contingency across our stories link our identities as professional tutors with expendability and trepidation while simultaneously discussing the ways in which the institution needs us. This is exemplified in Tina’s writing of “achiev[ing] some measure of success despite being contingent” and Isabel’s frustration with “the university’s need for [her] to work the maximum number of positions each semester and yet still consider [her] ‘contingent’ as a part-time lecturer.” These echo literature on contingent labor in academia that has found that the instability of future work leaves contingent workers feeling dispensable (Bergom & Waltman, 2008; Fels et al., 2021).

Tina and Isabel both spoke of being “lucky” to continually be offered so much work each semester, especially compared to others at our institution. Despite this, Tina’s “experience of being contingent is still one of food and job insecurity, poor compensation, and lack of

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benefits.” Isabel explained she “work[s] more than many full-time employees, but without the benefits or job security” and that the uncertainty around opportunities in the future

often leads to my saying “yes” and taking on far more than I should. I say yes to the extra, often uncompensated, work because I am worried that if I don’t, someone else will. If I’m not able to “prove” my value, I am expendable.

Tina and Isabel suggested that the offers of “more work than I could handle” were evidence that they were vital to the institution. However, without the guarantee of future work or adequate pay and benefits, it is also clear that the institution does not value contingent workers in a way that coincides with its need for them.

Another element of this paradox of being vital to but not valued by the institution is the irony of career advancement. Our work in the writing center helps others advance their careers while we do not have time to work on our own careers. For example, Tina shared that “the writing [she] support[s] is largely theses, dissertations, manuscripts, grant proposals, and conference presentations. These are high-stakes pieces of writing that are publicly published and/or that bring visibility and grants to the university.” She does not explicitly mention the impact that “accepting the full number of contracts [she is] allowed to take every semester (yes, including summer)” has on her ability to spend time on her own career development. However, between the lack of time and the lack of agency in and real incentive for conducting our own research and participating in professional development, our ability to focus on our careers is severely limited. In addition, any of the “choices” we face related to work could have significant implications for our careers, as Isabel shared previously.

Elements of our work as contingent workers are also connected with our identities in a few ways. Some aspects of our identities might lead us to contingent work. For example, women are one of the groups society expects to do labor no one else wants to do, and women often take on most of the

burden of labor at home too (Finley, 2008), which may result in the need for more flexible work. These are some of the reasons women make up the majority of contingent labor in academia (Bergom & Waltman, 2008; Finley, 2008). The invisibility of feminized work and the exploitative nature of the labor expected of women can be seen in Isabel’s and Tina’s contingent labor in a writing center and in their experiences related to motherhood. Isabel and Tina both wrote about the relationship between contingency and motherhood. For Isabel, contingent labor was part of the reason she “need[ed] to move [her] family of four to a different city.” While the “abundance of possibilities” in work opportunities helped support Isabel and her family, the uncertain nature of contingent work leads her to ask herself questions such as, “if enrollment continues to plummet, what does that mean for me and my family?” Despite this uncertainty, the continual opportunities for work (thus far) show that Isabel is vital to the institution, and they are “also taking [her] away from [her] life outside of that work.” For Tina, the impact of her experiences with contingent work on her health, benefits, and financial stability have “meant [she] cannot afford to start a family, something [she] desperately want[s]. Now in [her] 40s, [she has] little time left to do so biologically.” For both women, being vital to but not valued by the institution has negatively impacted their families. Similarly, the labor of women and mothers specifically is vital in our society but not valued through social safety nets that would support them. As a society, work that is feminized in this way is devalued.

Similar to the ways that feminized work is devalued, the work of disabled people is devalued because of “concerns about the extent to which the disability interferes with work activities” (Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016, p. 1116). In addition to fear of the potential impact a disability has on hiring or interpersonal experiences in the workplace, “disability impairment and disability identity are often assumed to be congruent” (Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016, p. 1112), but they are not. While a person might identify as being disabled, legal protections and accommodations are not necessarily offered if the existence of an impairment is

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not recognized legally or by the organization. Despite this, the presumed flexibility of contingent labor might attract disabled and chronically ill people, as it did for Lauren and Andrea. However, the complexities of the intersection of disability/chronic illness with contingent labor can further complicate our relationships with ourselves and our work, since work often becomes part of our identities, particularly in a capitalist society such as ours. Lauren explained that “the complexities of the intersection of these identities with being a contingent worker are difficult to make sense of.” While she appreciated the flexibility of contingent work, she recognized that “the sociocultural impact of being contingent perpetuates many of the same societal conditions that onset some of my disabilities in the first place” and was forced “to choose between showing [her] value as a productive employee, engaging in professional development opportunities [she’s] passionate about, and not doing too much for fear of becoming sick again as a result.” Andrea discussed another complexity of the intersection of these identities, as the value of her work was tied to her identity. She described her work as “vitaly important to who I am as a person.” However, as a contingent worker, she wrote that her

institution treats my work—myself—as expendable. When you are cobbling together multiple positions where you are treated as expendable, when you cannot fully appreciate the joy in what you do because of the stress that merely existing in our capitalist society brings, how can that not profoundly affect your identity as a human being?

In addition to the complex ways that contingent work becomes entwined with identity, working this way can be linked with destruction of our bodies and minds.

Working to Live but Destroying the Body

Each of our stories focused in similar yet different ways on the impacts contingent work has on our bodies and the paradox this creates

that the work we do to support ourselves is also work that destroys us. Across our four stories, there were commonalities regarding impacts on both our mental and physical health in relation to being contingent workers in the writing center. Some common concerns regarding the impact this work has on our bodies included: (a) balancing the joy the work itself brings with the stress that comes from worrying about whether or not one will receive enough contracts to survive next semester, (b) having neither health benefits nor stable and adequate income to regularly pay for health care expenses out of pocket, and (c) trying to avoid the inevitable mental and physical exhaustion that comes from the exploitation of being a contingent worker.

Unfortunately, the reality of these paradoxes often results in increased mental and physical stress on our bodies, as can be seen through examples of the three common concerns mentioned above. The impact the first concern, balancing the joy the work itself brings with the stress that comes from worrying about whether or not one will receive enough contracts to survive next semester, has on our bodies can be felt throughout the stories with contradicting words such as “lucky,” “appreciate,” “joy,” and “dream,” alongside “insecurity,” “fear,” “terror,” and “worried.” The paradox this creates can also clearly be seen in Andrea’s story when she said “I do still feel the impacts of contingency because the work is not guaranteed. I need this income to afford to survive, but I also need this work because of the joy I get out of working with writers.” This paradox, finding joy in work while simultaneously experiencing fear and terror in relation to it, puts a significant amount of mental and physical stress on contingent workers.

In addition to decreasing one’s quality of life overall, experiencing high amounts of repeated stress over time can lead to significant health issues. The second common concern, having neither health benefits nor stable and adequate income to regularly pay for health care expenses out of pocket, also has a direct impact on whether or not we have the ability to care for our bodies in the ways we should. A clear example of the result this concern can have on the physical body is illustrated in

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Tina's story when she described her experience of having oral surgery after years of not having access to dental care. She stated, "I did not have time off from work to recover and returned to work black and blue, swollen, drooling, sore, and hungry as I could consume only liquids for two weeks." Aside from the very literal physical impacts not having adequate access to health care can have on the body, the stress and uncertainty of not having health benefits can also be seen in Isabel's story. When talking about how she is often given a "full-time" workload, yet is still considered to be "contingent," she explained, "I am working more than many full-time employees, but without the benefits or job security." This frustration, coupled with the real fear and terror of not having job and income stability or access to benefits, quickly becomes exhausting.

Tina and Lauren both provided clear examples of this exhaustion in their stories, illustrating the third common concern found: trying to avoid the inevitable mental and physical exhaustion that comes from the exploitation of contingent workers. In talking about her time as a contingent worker in graduate school, Lauren disclosed that the

excessive workload, coupled with my already existing mental health conditions, culminated in a pressure to continue performing and producing . . . and, ultimately, obliterated my health and immune system, resulting in the onset of multiple chronic health conditions, along with other psychiatric and cognitive disorders.

Tina also expressed: "I had so much work to do and so many bills to pay that I did not have time for the mental breakdown I always felt on the cusp of and had a history of." These examples depict the grave reality of the mental and physical exhaustion these contingent workers experience.

For many neurodivergent contingent workers in higher education, it can feel necessary to mask and pass as neurotypical. As Andrea stated in her story, "I am neurodivergent, and I share this information when I feel safe to do so (but this is not always true)." This

pressure to mask as neurotypical often remains, even when performing the same roles and responsibilities as tenured and tenure-track faculty. This is because despite our similarities, faculty are still often in positions of power over contingent workers. An example of this is faculty being involved, along with administration, in decisions about contingent workers' career advancement and other opportunities for growth within the institution. Lauren explained she often feels more pressure to mask around those who are or could be in a position of authority/decision-making over her career advancement when she said:

The amount of stigma associated with neurodivergence and mental health conditions, especially those considered to be "more severe" by general society, pushes me to continue trying to mask my symptoms in order to pass as neurotypical. The fear of being replaced with someone who is viewed as more "reliable," "on time," "organized," and "prepared," often leads me to take on more than I should.

As contingent workers often do not feel valued by the institution, we both do not want to do more than we are paid to, but also know that in order to be "successful" in academia, we have to do more. However, continuing to mask and "do more" often makes the reality of both our contingency and our neurodiversity invisible to those we work with, while having detrimental effects on our bodies in the process. We cannot ignore the impact that working to live while destroying the body can have on contingent workers' overall well-being. As Lauren reflected in her story, "Much of my disabled positionality is also a direct result of the impact capitalist systems and institutions, including higher education, have on the bodies of real individuals, especially those who are often in some of the most contingent positions." The uncertainty and instability that come with being contingent is taxing. As Andrea further pointed out,

when you are cobbling together multiple positions where you are treated as expendable, when you cannot fully appreciate the

joy in what you do because of the stress that merely existing in our capitalist society brings, how can that not profoundly affect your identity as a human being?

Our stories and current literature (Fels et al., 2021) confirm these paradoxes can lead to worry, fear, and even terror, as contingent workers navigate finding joy and value in work in the writing center while simultaneously being treated as expendable and unvalued by the institution. Unfortunately, we are stuck in the paradox of having to work to live but destroying the body in the process, which does not seem like much of a choice.

The Illusion of Choice

Another paradox revealed by coding our lived experiences as contingent workers is what we call the illusion of choice. Generally, words like “choice” and “flexible” have positive connotations for contingent workers, as Inger Bergom and Jean Waltman (2008) respondents indicated. However, as our stories repeatedly demonstrated, when the alternative to a bad situation is an even worse situation, then is that really a choice?

Our stories include a number of choices we have each made between continued employment/income vs. health and wholeness outside of a career. For example, we see Tina grapple multiple times with this choice, and it is clear which side she ends up choosing time and time again: She goes to the job to pay the bills despite teetering on the edge of a breakdown, being “black and blue” from surgery, and aching for a family. With no leave of any kind and increasing age and health issues, what actual alternative does she have in these instances?

Lauren and Andrea too face illusory choices between their continued employment/income and their health. Lauren wrote about this conflict in saying that

having the flexibility to take one or two contracts less in a semester if I need to focus on my health is a huge benefit, but it is one that comes at a financial cost. The economic instability this creates directly

affects my mental health and stress levels. It forces me to choose.

Andrea also mentioned the very real possibility of becoming sick when she shared, “I am also chronically ill, and during a time of dangerous politics and COVID-19, precarious work without affordable and comprehensive coverage is dangerous for my health and well-being.” What these two stories suggest is that for some contingent workers, resolutions to the illusory choices of contingency may be found in relationships and roles they hold outside of academia, as illustrated by Lauren having a partner willing to spoon-feed her if necessary, and Andrea now holding a full-time job outside of higher education. It is striking how neither Lauren nor Andrea relies on supports found within the system of higher education because there are none that are responsive to their disabled and chronically ill identities.

On the other hand, as evidenced in Isabel’s story, having a life outside of higher education does not make one immune to doubt and misgiving about these choices. After identifying as a mother, she confessed that

now, as much as I love all my work and am so grateful for each opportunity, it is also taking me away from my life outside of that work. I don’t regret my initial leap of faith seven years ago, but I often wish I didn’t have to continue taking one every single semester since.

In other words, the specter of outside-of-work identities haunts her choice to remain employed.

The theme of the illusion of choice is exemplified when people quip, “Why don’t you just get your PhD if you don’t like being contingent?” which is a question that has been posed to us many times. First, as Andrea’s story shows, having a PhD is not the automatic ticket out of contingency that some would believe it is in higher education. Second, questions like this show blatant disregard for the larger sociocultural system of capitalism in which we exist and the beating that system regularly hands out to many individuals, especially those who hold marginalized identities.

Judith White (2008) argued that when contingent workers are in

working situations in which commitments to organizational assignments take precedence over all other commitments at all times, then faculty with family and other personal responsibilities often have no option but to step away from such demands. Thus the rhetoric of choice functions in place of outright exclusion. (n.p.)

White's point is that while explicit exclusion based on identity may be illegal, subtle rhetoric about the illusion of choice has no law against it.

Conclusion

So many elements of our lived experiences and identities are not captured here, and while our stories may reflect some shared experiences across contingent writing center workers, they offer only a glimpse into the complex issues related to identity and contingent writing center work. These limitations were largely a function of institutional restrictions on the methodology available to us as well as no support or incentive to conduct research. Despite this, our hope is that this piece is only the beginning, not the end, of such storytelling from a variety of perspectives and roles beyond just writing center directors and administrators.

A further limitation of autoethnography is its inherently small scale. This study only represents the perspectives of four White women in contingent positions in a single writing center. Our experiences cannot be generalized to the broader experiences of all contingent workers in writing centers. It is important to note that we are missing the voices of other historically underrepresented, systemically marginalized, and racially minoritized peoples, particularly in a field that largely employs White women. We cannot and will not speak for others. However, this study still informs a deeper understanding of contingent writing center labor by providing more nuanced and idiographic descriptions of the intersections between our identities and our lived experiences and creating a space for our voices.

One quote that particularly struck us as we undertook this work was Fels et al.'s (2021) questions: "Where does freedom end, and where does exploitation begin in workers' perceptions? Or are these workers, most of whom are White women, even aware of the paradox? How does the illusion of freedom in contingent work enable labor exploitation?" (p. 365). Our response to this is that yes, absolutely, unequivocally, we are aware that we are exploited, but what is the alternative? You can't pay bills with empty words, and nice thoughts don't fill bellies. Questioning whether contingent workers are aware of their own exploitation continues to marginalize contingent work, as though we are too daft to see what the system does to us. Instead, let's question the perpetrators of such exploitation.

To that end, we propose that the field of writing center studies can do much to contribute toward ending exploitative labor practices. As a start, collecting accurate, field-wide numbers that illustrate the prevalence of contingent labor would allow us to begin to capture the scope of the issue. Furthermore, as our stories showed, individuals working in contingent positions in writing centers often experience steep financial challenges, so if we value their voices at our conferences and in our leadership organizations, then their participation should be especially encouraged, and associated costs should demonstrate an awareness of the precarious financial situation in which their position places them. Additionally, leadership organizations ought to develop position statements that support and recognize contingent workers. Lastly, all of our publication venues should continue to encourage, include, and support the writing and research of varied voices in our field, including addressing how contingency intersects with race and other identities in writing center work.

As we have done frequently throughout this text, the word "contingent" is commonly used as an adjective. When used as a noun, however, it means a group of people with a similar goal. In this definition, the word sheds its negative connotations of terror and precariousness and gains strength in numbers and shared purpose. It is our hope that by sharing the voices and stories of four professional tutors working in contingent positions, we may

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catalyze a contingent of writing center folk to continue putting forth the experiences of those who so need and deserve to be heard.

Note

1. We have intentionally chosen to capitalize White throughout this piece as recommended by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP). Given the importance of identity in our work, this deliberate choice reflects our intention “to call attention to White as a race as a way to understand and give voice to how Whiteness functions in our social and political institutions and our communities” (Nguyễn & Pendleton, 2020, para. 7). The choice also allows us to specifically name White as a race, as opposed to making White neutral or the standard. As noted by D’Angelo (2018) in *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, “White people get to be ‘just people’” (p. 56), without mention of their race, while people of color are more often specifically identified by their race.

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Beth Sabo is a part-time lecturer for the University Writing Center at Eastern Michigan University. Her interests include supporting writers in the sciences, supporting graduate-level and faculty writers, and collaborating across disciplines through Writing Across the Curriculum.

Kaia-Marie A. Bishop, PhD, is a part-time lecturer for the University Writing Center at Eastern Michigan University. Her research interests include writing identity and writing pedagogy. She also works as a senior library assistant for a public library.

Kristine M. Gatchel is a part-time lecturer for the University Writing Center at Eastern Michigan University. Her interests include supporting writers both on campus and within the larger Ypsilanti community. She is also a lecturer for the Children's Literature department and the First-Year writing program.

Rachel Dick is a part-time lecturer for the University Writing Center at Eastern Michigan University. Her interests include supporting writers of all backgrounds and teaching discipline-specific writing-intensive courses. She is also a lecturer for the Women's and Gender Studies Department and the GameAbove College of Engineering and Technology.

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