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The potential of archival methods in industrial relations, sociology of work, management and HRM research: a case study of the relationship between temporary employment agencies and the state in the UK during the 1980s

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the contribution of archival data and historical methods to impactful research in industrial relations, the sociology of work, management studies and Human Resource Management. Whilst archival methods are widely used in some of these fields of research, there has also been considerable debate in these fields over the challenges of conducting impactful research using archival data. The paper draws on archival records from the National Archives in the UK to explore the evolving relationship between private temporary employment agencies and the state over the 1980s. The paper highlights how the actions of specific labour market actors, particularly lobbying activities by private agencies, and the changing economic and political climate over the 1980s, impacted on perceptions and attitudes within government towards temporary employment agencies. In doing so, the paper sheds new light on the early evolution of what are now recognised as important dynamics shaping the contemporary employment agency industry.

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Archival methods; historical research; industrial relations; management; HRM; sociology of work; temporary employment agencies; job placement; state; public employment service

Introduction

This paper highlights the contribution of archival data and methods to impactful research in industrial relations, the sociology of work, management and Human Resource Management (HRM). Within these fields, there are some strong traditions of using archival methods, although use varies across these disciplinary areas and over time (for reviews see Ackers 2016; Strauss and Whitfield 1998; Patmore 2018; Ventresca and Mohr 2017; Walby and Luscombe 2018). Archival data has provided the main evidence in numerous seminal organisational case studies and business ethnographies (Decker 2013; Freeland 2006; Jones 2005). Archival research has also been used alone as a methodology and alongside other research methods to provide 'triangulation' on a topic or issue (Gidley 2017; Booth and Rowlinson 2006), shedding important light on a wide range of work and employment-related topics including management strategy, corporate culture, employment systems, contractual forms and relationships between business and the state

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(Anderson and Quinlan 2008; Rowlinson and Hassard 1993; Pettigrew et al. 2003; Hollow and Vik 2016; Shaikh 2022).

It might seem unnecessary, therefore, for an intervention arguing that archival methods can produce impactful research in industrial relations, the sociology of work, management and HRM. It is certainly not the aim of this paper to claim to be 'rediscovering' the potential of archival research in fields where it is already widely used and where there are leading journals within these fields which publish predominantly archival research. However, there has been considerable reflection in all these fields over the contribution of archival research, and over the ways in which archival methods are used by scholars. Taylor et al. (2009), for example, argue that the impact of archival research in business history has been limited due to an empiricist focus and a lack of theorisation, although others have challenged this conclusion, pointing to contextually grounded and impactful archival-based business and management research in areas, such as ethics, CSR and leadership (Lundqvist 2019; Francis 2003; Patmore 2018; Toms and Wilson 2010).

The paper argues that archival analysis can – and has – shed important new light on a range of contemporary topics in industrial relations, the sociology of work, management and HRM. Archival and documentary evidence can help to show how an idea, philosophy, approach or trend in work and employment – such as teamworking, managerialism, or precarious work – that is widespread today came into development or prominence, and can show the evolution of debate (Ackers 2016; Mueller and Carter 2007; Reveley 1999) Archival data can also help illuminate how key 'old' and 'new' actors such as the state, trade unions, employer associations and civil society organisations have historically shaped the employment relationship and its regulation, and in doing so provide insight into contemporary dynamics (Heery et al. 2012; Rathmell 2007; Lundqvist 2019; Shaikh 2022). By providing historical context into work and employment practices and management strategies, archival methods can help advance understanding in the subject area by beyond some of the ahistorical, univeralist models that dominate a field, such as HRM (Vincent et al. 2020). It can also enrich studies that draw largely on quantitative or qualitative primary data (Parker and Arrowsmith 2014; Garavan et al. 2019). Archival data can also play a key role in the emergence and development of new areas of research in industrial relations, management and HRM, such as those utilising 'big data' and data analytics (Cowley et al. 2021; Shaikh 2022; Maxwell-Stewart 2016; Patmore, 2021a). There do remain important practical and methodological issues to consider when using archival data. This paper calls for closer consideration and reflection of these issues and challenges whilst highlighting the rich potential of archival data for illuminating a range of issues in industrial relations, the sociology of work, management and HRM.

These arguments are illustrated through a historical analysis of the relationship between the private sector temporary employment agency industry and the state in the UK in the 1980s. Temporary employment agencies are widely recognised as playing a key role in the economy today, with around 280,000, people, or 1% of the employed workforce employed in temporary jobs through agencies (Bingham and Byrne 2021). The contemporary private temporary agency industry works closely as a partner of the state in a range of job placement activities (Greer et al. 2018). However, this was not always the case. At the start of the 1980s, the impact of Thatcherism had already had a significant impact on industrial relations, the nature of the employment relationship and wider society in the UK, and privatisation, and partnerships between the state and private

industry for the delivery of services previously undertaken by the state had begun to accelerate (see Jones 2005; Fairbrother and Carter 1999). However, in the delivery of job placement activities, there remained a sharp divide in the UK between the state and private industry, a position that was similar in the Australia and other countries at that time (O'Donnell 2003; Considine et al. 2011). Indeed, in the early 1980s, amidst a deepening economic recession the very co-existence of private fee-charging temporary employment agencies alongside a publicly funded employment service was being questioned by many and was the subject of much academic and policy debate. Whilst some attention has focused on the historical evolution of the agency industry, both in the UK and elsewhere (Gonos 1997; Brook and Purcell 2020), relatively little attention has focused on the forces shaping the relationship between private agencies and the state and the long-term impact of these on the development of the private employment agency industry.

The paper draws on archival analysis of documents available at the UK National Archives, which allow for a detailed analysis of evolving relations between private sector businesses and the state in the 1980s. Drawing on the analysis of 26 files in the UK National Archives, containing over 1,100 individual documents, the main contributions of the paper are threefold. First, the paper highlights how temporary employment agencies were a very active labour market actor, lobbying government and seeking to expand and develop the market for temporary work throughout the 1980s. This was achieved through innovation in the services they offered, and through attempts to establish themselves as a credible stakeholder to partner with the state. Theoretically, this contrasts with the common depiction of agencies in management and HRM-based studies at the time as neutral, passive labour market intermediaries.

Secondly, the paper reveals how economic conditions and the political climate, specifically the economic ideology of the first Thatcher government (Jones 2005; Cerny 2008) are important to understanding how the temporary agency industry has developed in the long term. A deep economic recession, pressures on government spending and reviews of the public employment service created opportunities for private agencies to strategically lobby around their distinctive expertise in temporary placement to question whether a state-run public employment service was inefficiently duplicating activities they could provide. Yet, by the end of the 1980s, following sustained lobbying by the private agency industry and amidst a changing political climate, partnerships and co-operation between the state and private employment agencies were much more common. The paper explores how and why this relationship changed, and with what consequences. The third contribution of the paper is to highlight how archival analysis can help illuminate contemporary dynamics of the relationship between labour market actors, in a range of areas of work and employment research.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 considers archival research methods in industrial relations, the sociology of work, management and HRM, before considering more specifically research into temporary employment agency working. Section 3 reflects on the methodological issues pertaining to the use of archival data to explore temporary agency working. Section 4 looks at the evolution of the relationship between temporary agencies and the state in the UK in the 1980s, structured around three distinct periods. Section 5 offers some conclusions.

Archival methods in industrial relations, the sociology of work, management and HRM

Archival research has been defined as 'data generated in the past, stored in archives' (Gidley 2017, 216). Archival data can include documents generated by, or about, organisations, the state or other labour market actors. Common archival documents used in industrial relations, the sociology of work, management and HRM-based research include company records, minutes and papers, correspondence of meetings, court records, wage board and arbitration documentation, briefing and policy papers, speeches, the financial, production, human resource or other records of businesses, contracts, historical statistical data and other data (Anderson and Quinlan 2008; Scott 1990; Shaikh 2022). Gidley (2017) makes the distinction between primary archival sources – the actual material artefacts produced in conditions of proximity to events described, and secondary sources (created by people writing at a distance from the events, but which draw on primary sources). In this paper, attention – and the specific case study example presented on the temporary agency industry – is drawn largely from primary archival sources, although some references will be made also to secondary sources. These documents can be found in specific, dedicated archives, which might be physical, or digital in nature. Archives might be set up and overseen by a range of institutions, organisations or stakeholders, including the state, private companies, charities and individuals. Libraries may also hold considerable archival material, for example, in National Libraries, or in local history collections. Whilst some material is deliberately placed and made available through dedicated archives, other archival material may be located in a range of places, deposited (and accessed) in a more ad-hoc way.

There are a wide range of reasons as to why archival and documentary research might be of value in research in industrial relations, the sociology of work, management and HRM (Scott 1990; Gidley 2017; Ackers 2016; Patmore 2018; Strauss and Whitfield 1998). First, archival research may provide new insight into a topic or issue, helping to uncover social processes at play and to draw out historical relationships between labour market actors (Gidley 2017; Patmore 2018). This can help provide an understanding beyond official corporate accounts of work and employment issues (for example, those found on company websites or in authorised company histories) (Booth et al. 2007; Mort and Spinardi 2004). For example, Stuart et al. (2011) unpack the New Labour government's employment regulation modernisation program in the UK between 2007 and 2010, using extensive documentary evidence on the Union Modernisation Fund (UMF), to address whether this funded programme was a socially engineered attempt to steer unions towards partnership approaches and to shape a new 'supply-side' trade unionism. They highlight a nuanced and evolving relationship between unions and the state, rather than a deterministic set of outcomes from this program, in which some unions were able to exercise their agency in their use of UMF, and used it to trial new strategies, develop new representational roles and increase their knowledge and democratic assets (Stuart et al. 2011).

A second reason for accessing archival data may be that alternative methods may not be available (Gidley 2017; Scott 1990; Venresca and Mohr, 2017). If the events being recorded took place a long time ago, those directly involved may no longer be alive to provide evidence through surveys or interviews. In other cases, due to confidentiality,

contractual restrictions, or sensitive subject areas, respondents may be unable – or unwilling to provide direct evidence about historical events. For example, using government records obtained through Freedom of Information requests, Shaikh (2022) reveals how decision making within government crucially impacted upon the evolution and development of an IT system, used in UK Post Offices over the last 2 decades, which generated systematic accounting errors, and resulted in the wrongful prosecution of hundreds of sub-postmasters in the UK (see also Wallis 2021). Decker (2013) uses the Legacy Tobacco archives (https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/tobacco) to look at the actions of managers within British American Tobacco in the 1990s and 2000s. Their analysis of memos, policy documents, presentations and speeches reveal how the company's declining political authority was countered through managerial actions and their development of a calculated and deliberate CSR strategy designed to reduce stakeholder support for tobacco regulation. The authors point to the particular value of archival analysis in understanding management actions and strategy:

'Comments contained in emails, presentation notes and strategy papers, for instance, may be capable of multiple interpretations, may not represent the views of all senior managers and can be coloured by personal ambition and office politics. Despite this, they are likely to provide a more reliable guide to corporate decision makers' thinking and motivations than interviews which can produce self-serving responses where corporate or professional reputations are at stake' (Decker 2013, 285).

Thirdly, archival research may be used to complement and enrich both quantitative survey research and qualitative interviews or organisational ethnographies (Decker and McKinlay 2020; Patmore 2018). Hollow and Vik's analysis of banking careers at Barclays between 1945 and 1980, for example, combines oral history interviews with documentary analysis. Their documentary analysis allowed them to map the content and the role of training within Barclays during this period, complementing the oral testimonies offering personal perspectives and experiences of bank staff on training. Parker and Arrowsmith (2014) examine regulatory change amid economic liberalisation in the New Zealand and Fiji, supplementing expert-stakeholder survey responses with a detailed documentary analysis of regulations to reveal the gendered effects of regulatory change. Garavan et al. (2019), in a meta-analysis of quantitative studies of the organisational impact of training, point to the importance of incorporating archival data into company-level measures of training, in order to improve the validity of training measures and to ensure robustness in assessing the training–performance relationship.

Fourth, Gidley (2017) notes how documentary sources can help in the understanding of how ideas have evolved on a topic (see also Anderson and Quinlan 2008; Patmore 2018; Gidley 2017). In the area of work and employment, Francis's (2003) analysis of company documents and memos in one UK manufacturing firm, for example, shows how the language of HRM was used to shape attitudes during a change programme, with awareness training, briefings, line manager duties and recruitment practices all providing a means through which, over time, the change programme was legitimised and institutionalised. In another example, Kaufman (2019) uses archival data to explore the early history of employee management in America, drawing on memos and company documents to show how ideas associated today with HRM have their origins in management practices as early as the 1920s.

Finally, archival and historical data can provide the foundation for the development of new areas and methods of research in sub-fields or disciplines. One notable example of this is in the area of 'big data', where archival and historical data are playing a key role in the development of new, large datasets, facilitated by digitalisation (Maxwell-Stewart 2016; Bingham and Byrne 2021; Cowley et al. 2021). Godfrey et al. (2021), for example, look at research into the penal system, and show how the creation of archival research networks, through mass digitalisation of records of British and Irish convict men who were transported to Australia, has transformed a set of disparate documents into a coherent big data collection, opening up new possibilities for analysis. In another example, Patmore et al. (2021) draw on an emerging and growing 'big data' collection of archival documents (including qualitative and visual documents) to explore the evolution of cooperatives and experiences of demutualisation in Australia. Another example is Anderson and Quinlan's (2008) use of arbitral and court records to construct a new database to allow for the examination of the changing relationship between labour and the state, and of the regulation of work in Australia and New Zealand.

These examples provide evidence of just some of the ways in which archival data has been used to provide a rich understanding of a range of issues in industrial relations, the sociology of work, management and HRM. As noted above, within each of these fields there are strong traditions of using archival methods. There are also dedicated journals in these fields where archival analysis is the dominant methodology used in papers, including the Historical Journal of Industrial Relations, Labour History, Labour History Review, Business History, and Management and Organisational History. However, the relative use of archival methods (compared to other methods) within industrial relations, sociology of work, management and has been the subject of some debate. Within industrial relations, for example, there have been concerns that large-scale survey research has 'displaced' other methods in the field, notably intensive workplace-based case studies – the latter being a methodology where archival data are more widely used (see McCarthy 1994; although see Marginson for a counter-view (1998)).

To illustrate the varied use (across fields and over time) of archival methods in published papers in sociology of work, management, industrial relations, management and HRM journals, (beyond dedicated labour and business history journals) a simple content analysis of journal paper content was undertaken. The content analysis here draws on original journal articles published in 8 leading journals, covering the years 1990–1999, and 2010–2019.[1] These journals were: in the field of sociology of work, Work Employment and Society, and Work and Occupations; in industrial relations, the British Journal of Industrial Relations and the Journal of Industrial Relations; in management studies, the Journal of Management Studies and the Academy of Management Journal; and in HRM, the Human Resource Management Journal and Human Resource Management. The first time period of 1990–1999 was chosen as a number of these journals were only founded in the 1980s, and a full decade run of papers was therefore not available earlier than the 1990s. Using searches available via these journals' websites, alongside searches of titles, abstracts and keywords on ProQuest and Web of Knowledge, original articles published in these journals were examined for mention of the use of archival, historical, or documentary data or methods using search terms. It is possible that some articles using archival methods may have been missed by this content analysis (where these terms above are not used at all in any text in the papers) but the findings,

Table 1. Archival methods in papers in selected journals in sociology of work, industrial relations, management and HRM, 1990–1999, and 2010–2019.

Journal	Number of original articles (and proportion of all published papers in journal) using archival methods 1990–1999	Number of original articles (and proportion of all published papers in journal) using archival methods 2010–2019	N (Total papers published in journal) (1990–1999)	N (Total papers published in journal) (2010–2019)
Work, Employment and Society	21 (9%)	37 (7%)	226	528
Work and Occupations	12 (7%)	8 (5%)	172	160
British Journal of Industrial Relations	14 (5%)	29 (9%)	269	341
Journal of Industrial Relations	25 (10%)	27 (8%)	262	349
Journal of Management Studies	28 (8%)	34 (7%)	330	473
Academy of Management Journal	13 (3%)	23 (3%)	402	732
Human Resource Management Journal	9 (5%)	19 (6%)	189* (1994–1999 only)	308
Human Resource Management	11 (4%)	27 (5%)	275	499

Notes: Content analysis of published original articles, compiled via searches of full text, titles and abstracts on Journal homepages, ProQuest and Web of Science. To identify papers using archival methods, searches used terms 'archiv*, 'historical' and 'documentary', with inspection of full-text of papers returned to confirm whether archival methods and data were used. Paper classified as using archival methods if any or all of the research strategy involved the analysis of archival documents.

nonetheless, can provide some insight into the use of archival methods across disciplines and over time.

The results, presented in Table 1, show that in total, 5,515 original articles were published in these 8 journals in the 1990–1999 and 2010–2019 periods. Archival, historical or documentary data or methods are used in 337, or 6%, of the total number of published articles across these 8 journals. Published papers using archival methods and data are somewhat more common in the selected industrial relations and sociology of work journals, compared to the management and HRM journals. There is no notable pattern of decline in the use of archival methods over time in these journals, indeed, in some cases the proportion of papers using archival methods has increased between the 1990s to the 2010s (for example, in the British Journal of Industrial Relations, Human Resource Management Journal and Human Resource Management). The lowest proportions of published papers using archival methods are in the Academy of Management Journal and the US journal, Human Resource Management. Overall, however, the proportions of published papers drawing on archival methods are relatively small.

The use of archival and documentary data is also sometimes downplayed in discussions of 'impact' in business and management research, with research based on survey, interview, or experimental data often given more attention (Greer et al. 2018). Some of

this may reflect the language and metrics used to assess impact. Whilst by no means the only (or most important) indicator of impactful academic research, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK in 2013 defined impact as: 'social, economic and cultural benefits and impacts beyond academia, arising from excellent research.' As Hughes et al. (2019) note, in business and management, Impact Case Studies were required to describe both 'reach' and 'significance', 'using a compelling narrative that linked the research undertaken to the impact depicted.' As they note, the influence of research may take many years to emerge and can be difficult to trace and attribute to specific research projects. In the case of archival research, there is the additional challenge of connecting historical research – by definition about issues, topics and debate in the past – to short, medium or long-term impact in the present. Research conducted by the author shows that of the 410 impact case studies in Business and Management, a relatively small number – 33 (8% of the total) – mention foundational research based on archival, historical or documentary methods whilst 143 (35%) mention surveys or questionnaires and 96 (23%) mention interview data.

Kipping et al. (2014) propose a set of methodological guidelines for the conduct of historical research in business and management. First, they note the importance of undertaking robust 'source criticism' (see also Decker and McKinlay 2020). Kipping et al. (2014) note that archival data provide you only with 'fragments' from the past, with historical researchers always only dealing with a small sample of all possible documents and evidence. Historical researchers also face the conundrum of establishing motives of actors involved and their actions. In the absence of a complete historical record, researchers need to consider why particular evidence was gathered, and why particular documents have been preserved, and on what basis they have been made available to researchers (see also Kieser 1994; Booth and Rowlinson 2006). What were the motives and reasons of actors, such as corporations, the state, and others in preserving, making available, or destroying records?

These challenges around the conduct of archival research are reflected on in the remainder of this paper which uses archival methods to look at the evolving relationship between the private temporary employment agencies and the state in the UK in the 1980s. In 2021, there were over 20,000 temporary employment agencies supplying workers to firms in the UK today, in a sector generating £5 billion of turnover annually (World Employment Confederation 2021). Temporary employment agencies have developed close partnerships with the state over the last 25 years in the UK – and other countries – and have been closely involved in the delivery of a range of quasi-marketised employment programs such as welfare to work delivery and other active labour market initiatives (Peck and Theodore, 1999; Greer et al. 2018; Ingold and Valizade 2017). The regulation of the sector has also been the subject of much interest over the last decade in the UK, particularly during the long and protracted process of regulatory reform and the ultimate adoption of the Agency Working Regulations in the UK in 2013, where legislation was passed to ensure equal treatment for agency temps compared to directly employed workers. This was the subject of significant lobbying by the agency industry and generated considerable debate over the role of temporary employment agencies in the economy (Forde and Slater 2016).

An historical analysis of the shifting relationship between the state and private temporary employment agencies can help shed important light on contemporary dynamics in

the sector. Can the lobbying tactics used by private agencies today be seen in earlier periods, and if so, what points of leverage did agencies use with the state historically, and why? When did partnerships between the state and the private agency sector begin to evolve and why? Academic literature in the 1980s around agency working focused almost exclusively on employer rationales for using agency labour, theorising employers' use of agency workers as a numerically flexible part of the 'flexible firm' (Atkinson and Meager 1986) or in terms of transactions costs economising (Williamson 1985). Critics highlighted the overemphasis on supposedly rational employer strategies in these models, and the focus solely on the 'demand-side' drivers of flexibility (Pollert 1991). Subsequent sociological, employment relations and socio-legal studies of agency working have focused more closely on the dynamics of the triangular relationship in agency working (Gottfried 1992; Gonos 1997; Arrowsmith 2011) but a return to the earlier 1980s period offers a potentially useful lens for placing more contemporary studies and developments in historical perspective.

Methods

The paper draws on archival documents in the UK National Archives. The National Archives are home to historical documents created and collected by UK central government departments and major courts of law. Ceeney (2008) notes that public right to view government documents came into place via legislation in 1958, along with a rule restricting access until 50 years after their publication. This was reduced to 30 years in 1967. Whilst many records (particularly Census records) have been digitised, the majority of documents remain physical documents, only accessible in person at the National Archives in Kew, which opened in 1977.

Documents in the National Archives are often described as 'open archival' (Scott 1990) in that they can be consulted by anyone; however, the definition of 'open' is not as clear cut as it might seem. Many documents housed in the National Archives remain under-restricted access. The Freedom of Information Act in the UK, passed in 2005, has opened up the possibility of requesting contemporary government documents (and viewing them in the National Archives), although there remain challenges of identifying what information could be available, and in making specific requests that are deemed to be in the public interest to obtain access (Ozdemir, 2009; Walby and Luscombe 2018).

The National Archives provides a potentially rich source of historical data, through the records of individual government departments, and through various topic-organised runs of files. Files typically include correspondence, memos, communications within and between departments, drafting of policy, discussions between the department other labour market actors, along with a host of other accompanying material (leaflets, posters, photographs, brochures, reports). Individual files can contain anything from a few to many hundreds of documents. In terms of Kipping et al.'s (2014) call for robust 'source criticism', it is important to note that each file in the National Archives has been through multiple processes of archiving, with some 'live' organising taking place at the time documents were created, as they were passed around and consulted within an individual department of government. At the stage of archiving for the National Archives, some documents will have been destroyed and removed, and a chronology and order imposed on the remaining

documents within the file by an archivist, or team of archivists. Files are typically ordered chronologically and often by sub-topic, with some judgment being made about where a particular piece of evidence is placed within a file. These decisions do impact upon the way a researcher looks at a file after retrieving it from an archive and interprets its contents and the story it tells (Kipping et al. 2014; Decker and McKinlay 2020).

To identify relevant documents on temporary agency working, the researcher drew on previous research into temporary work, and into the functioning of the state-run public employment service (see for example, Price 2000; Forde 2001, 2008). Phrases and terminology used during the 1980s to describe temporary employment agencies, state placement activities, as well as related issues and debates were used in National Archive catalogue searches, notably 'fee-charging employment agency, 'private employment agency industry' (or 'PEA'), job centres and partnerships, 'role of the public employment service', 'temporary jobs/work' and 'employment exchanges'.

The National Archives is an archive of government material, not of business records, but temporary employment agencies are referenced and included in a significant number of files, due to ongoing discussion within government about their regulation. One hundred and fourteen individual files of relevance were identified through catalogue searches, covering the years 1910–2005. After an initial inspection of the contents of each (using catalogue descriptions, and in some cases, an initial physical inspection of a file in the National Archives) a subset of 26 files were identified for closer analysis, which focused on the 1980–1990 period. These 26 files were consulted and recorded during a number of research visits to the National Archives in the first half of 2022. Files each contained between 60 and 250 individual documents. The files were inspected first to gain an overall chronology of the content, and relevant documents were photographed digitally, with notes also being by the researcher on paper. Overall, 1,150 digital photographs were taken from these files, and these were analysed in more detail, away from the National Archives, alongside notes taken by the researcher.

The information in these 26 files were dominated by documents produced within the Department of Employment in government. These focused on the role of the public employment service and their job centres, and the relationship between these job centres and private fee-charging agencies. There were also a significant number of documents produced within the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) a state-run body established in the mid-1970s with a remit to coordinate training and employment services and programmes across the UK. The MSC developed a growing interest in placement activities and the role of both the public employment service and the private agency industry, particularly as unemployment grew in the 1980s. Documents available in the National Archives record lobbying activities, meetings and letters between state officials (the Prime Minister, Ministers and Secretaries of State, Department of Employment staff, MPs, and private agencies). Lobbying correspondence was extensive, and this lobbying often triggered calls and requests within the Department of Employment and Manpower Services Commission for data on the private agency industry and generated further discussion and internal debate over their role. Thematic analysis of these documents was undertaken, along with the generation of a chronology of interactions and debate between the state and the private temporary agency industry over the 1980s. The results are below are presented and discussed chronologically, and are split into three phases of

the development of agency–state relations over the 1980s. In line with the suggestions of Booth and Rowlinson (2006), Kipping et al. (2014) and others, references to specific files in the National Archives (e.g. LAB 106/3; ET/339/1) are provided within the text to highlight which specific documents have been used as source evidence for the results.

Results

The start of the 1980s: challenging economic conditions and competition between agencies and the state

Whilst private employment agencies had existed since at least the start of the 20th century in the UK, prior to the 1950s their activities were almost exclusively focused on 'permanent placement' where an agency would place a worker with a firm, collecting a fee from either the worker, employer (or both) and then 'stepping out of the picture' (Gonos 1997). 'Temporary placement' services began to be offered in the 1950s and 1960s, a fundamentally distinct business activity in that agencies were able to extract ongoing fees for placing a worker temporarily with firms (Gonos 1997). This fee was typically a percentage premium above the workers' hourly wage and was collected from a firm for every hour the temporary worker was employed. Temporary placement saw quite rapid growth in the UK in the 1960s, concentrated in London and the south-east, particularly in clerical and unskilled manual occupations (ET 14/339/1). The sector saw some decline in the 1970s, amidst economic downturns and recession, although some individual agencies did continue to grow rapidly, largely by marketing themselves as 'employers', allowing firms to use temporary agency labour with relatively few obligations and costs associated with being an employer (LAB 106/3).

In the UK, the Conservative government came to power in 1979, with Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister. By the early 1980s, significant labour market reform had already begun to take place, alongside a wider programme of reform of the state, underpinned by a free market economic ideology (Fairbrother and Carter 1999; Jones 2005; Cerny 2008). This included a programme of privatisation, and attempts to 'marketise' areas of the public sector, including job placement services. At the start of the 1980s, state-run job-centres offered a range of services to the unemployed, and were viewed largely as competitors to private agencies in the area of job placement, although, in reality, different groups of workers and firms used their services. State-run jobcentres were largely accessed by the unemployed, whereas temporary agencies drew from a wider pool of labour, including many already in employment (ET/14/339/2). Reviews of the public employment service over the 1960s and 1970s had concluded that many employers did not use jobcentres to advertise their vacancies, seeing them as offering a poorer service (and mostly utilised by the unemployed) to private agencies (ET/14/339/1). Within government, during the 1960s and 1970s the view was repeatedly expressed that private agencies would ultimately be competed out of existence as the public employment service was developed further (ET/14/117). Movement of the state job centres into advertising temporary vacancies was seen as an important part of the future development of the state-run job centres and over the 1970s, job centres did begin to advertise more temporary vacancies, competing directly with private temporary employment agencies (ET/14/117)

However, at the start of the 1980s, this competition began to be questioned by some. Rising unemployment and an economic recession under the first term of the Conservative Thatcher government meant that the economic priorities of the government were focused squarely on reducing unemployment and reducing overall public expenditure, underpinned by a dogmatic ideology of promoting free markets and competition between the state and the private sector (Jones 2005). Lobbying from the largest temporary agency employer organisation at the time – the Federation of Personnel Services (FPS), representing 600 of the largest agencies in the UK – had begun in 1980 as unemployment started to rise. In a series of letters and meetings with the government, the FPS called on the government to reduce spending on the public jobcentres, and to step away from temporary placement activities, to avoid unnecessary duplication with private temporary employment agencies (ET/14/112). The state jobcentres had an unfair competitive advantage, they argued, as, unlike private agencies, they did not charge employers for their services. However, in meetings with the FPS, the government reinforced that they would be continuing to operate in this segment of the market. In a speech made by the Secretary of State for Employment at an FPS conference in 1980, he argued that it was 'unreasonable to deny jobseekers access to the PES' (ET/14/112) whilst a letter from the Prime Minister to the FPS also made this clear:

'All of our efforts are aimed at restoring the economy in a way which will prevent the reoccurence of the misery caused by rising unemployment … At a time like this the country needs both a good quality public employment service and a vigorous, competitive private sector' (Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Letter to Director of the FPS, December 1980; ET/14/112).

A internal briefing note to senior staff in the Department for Employment noted a 'concerted lobby levelled at MPs against job centres' from the FPS (ET/14/122) which continued throughout 1981. This lobbying highlighted the sharp decline in temporary placements for private agencies, as unemployment continued to rise and employers cut back on their use of temporary labour. The FPS began to focus its lobbying more closely on 'wasteful' public spending on placement activities, citing the ongoing efficiency and cost-saving reviews being undertaken across government by Lord Rayner (this review took place between 1979 and 83). The FPS argued that public expenditure could be reduced significantly by cutting down the number of expensive state-run job centres. The FPS also criticised the strategy of the Department of Employment and the Manpower Services Commission of establishing new jobcentres in high street locations – where they were very visible alongside private agencies (ET/14/122). Private agencies also lobbied that the public employment service should start charging employers for activities to ensure they were competing on an equal footing with private firms. In one letter to the Prime Minister in 1981, they noted:

'The private employment service has no wish to reduce the effectiveness of the States' job finding operation, yet neither is it prepared to see its very viability threatened by a publicly funded competitor' (Letter from FPS to Prime Minister, June, 1982; ET/14/122)

In other letter, in 1982, they also pressed government to take action, arguing that:

'by sensible reductions in staffing … the elimination of the temps service and (charging) to employers … it should be possible to restore the right competitive balance' (Letter from FPS to Secretary of State for Employment, January 1982; ET/14/122).

This lobbying led to a series of internal briefings, policy notes and discussion documents over the evolving role of the public employment service, and the role of private agencies in the UK economy. Within the Department of Employment, it was widely accepted that in temporary placement, private agencies led the way. At the start of the 1980s private agencies were placing 500,000 workers per year in temporary roles, compared to just 79,000 temporary, short-term placements made by the state job centres (for permanent placements, the position was reversed with state job centres making 1.5 million placements per year, compared to 600,000 made by private agencies). (ET/14/122). The Department for Employment felt that to retain the confidence of employers and to encourage them to advertise their vacancies with the state job centres, it was important that they were seen as a service that could advertise both temporary and permanent placements. It was also felt that there was more than enough placement activity available to accommodate flourishing public and private sectors, and that some aspects of co-operation might be able to generate efficiency gains that all government departments were being asked to find.

One area of co-operation that was actively considered by the Department of Employment was the mutual marketing and promotion of services between private temporary agencies and the state. Part of the lobbying campaign by the FPS had focused on trying to secure access to the state job centres to advertise their temporary vacancies. Officials from the Department of Employment had reservations about doing this, as they viewed temporary employment agencies not as genuine employers, but rather brokers or intermediaries. It was agreed in 1982 that state job centres could hold and display folders with the names and addresses of private agencies in them and that jobseekers could consult these and follow up with private agencies if they wished (ET/14/117). Similarly, the services of the job centres would be advertised in the offices of private agencies. Within the Department for Employment, this opportunity was seen as a means through which the state job centres might, over time, take a greater share of the temporary placement market, attracting workers beyond the long-term unemployed who were the dominant users of job centres, and persuading more employers to advertise temporary vacancies with the job centres. Considerable effort was put into designing marketing materials for display in private agencies and for distribution to employers and the reciprocal display arrangements were launched with considerable publicity from the Department of Employment in June 1982 (ET/14/118).

Towards greater co-operation: the vacancy experiment in the mid-1980s

Despite these reciprocal arrangements, relations between the state and private agencies remained largely at arms-length until the mid-1980s. By 1985, unemployment remained high, at around 11% of the workforce (nearly 3 million) with the reduction of long-term unemployment remaining a key priority. Whilst some scaling back of plans to further expand high-street job centres had occurred over 1983 and 1984 (Price 2000), temporary employment agencies continued to lobby the government strongly. They continued to focus on what they saw as wasteful duplication of services between private agencies and state-run job centres. Whilst the marketing of their services in folders in job centres helped raise the profile of private sector agencies, they wanted greater access, in particular the ability to advertise their 'live' temporary vacancies within job centres. This, they

felt, would even out the competitive advantage that the state had in placement and allow jobseekers access to a wider set of job vacancies.

Many in the Department of Employment remained unconvinced by this when it was proposed, arguing that it would be problematic to actively promote the services of private temporary agencies – who they saw as intermediaries rather than employers – in this way. However, they did agree to run an experiment of advertising vacancies in 6 areas of the UK in 1985 (ET/14/118). For a fee of £130 per month, agencies could place a folder containing a list of current vacancies within jobcentres, and jobcentre staff would more actively refer jobseekers to these, alongside the regular job boards and vacancies. Jobseekers would need to contact the private sector agency if they were interested in any vacancies, rather than engage with jobcentre staff about these vacancies (ET/14/125).

This trial was, however, found to have disappointing results, with very few agencies signing up to the scheme in the second half of 1985 and through 1986 (ET/14/125). Job centre staff cited a lack of resources and time to be able to actively signal jobseekers to these folders, and were, in some instances, also reluctant to advise or counsel jobseekers towards what they saw as insecure, temporary agency vacancies from competitors in placement. Overall, analysis of this experiment found that private agencies had little enthusiasm and interest in this scheme, due to a lack of opportunities to engage directly with jobseekers through the job centres. Nonetheless, the experiment symbolically did signal a greater willingness within government to consider closer relations with private sector employment agencies, paving the way for further cooperation later in the decade.

The late 1980s: the first steps towards state-private sector employment agency partnerships

Economic conditions improved towards the end of the 1980s, and between 1987 and 1989, unemployment fell sharply from 2.5 million workers to 1.5 million workers (10% to 6% of the workforce). Lobbying of the state from the private agency industry continued throughout this period, but by the end of the decade, it now had a very different focus, on the challenges faced by temporary agencies in finding applicants for temporary jobs in much tighter labour markets. Private agencies argued that they were unable to fill many of their temporary vacancies, and that greater access to the state-run jobcentres would open up a much larger pool of applicants. The idea of having reciprocal folders displayed in private agencies and the job centres was considered again by the Department of Employment, although the failure of the 1985 experiment was noted. It was agreed, however, that at a national level, private agencies should be allowed to display their vacancies in job centres, but that the nature and extent of cooperation would be determined at a local level, dependent on individual job centres capacity and resources to service such arrangement. In 1989 and 1990, a fifteen-page document of guidance for local job centres was developed and discussed (ET/14/339/1), and this was shared with the Federation of Recruitment and Employment Services (now the name of the FPS), and ultimately amended in line with some of their comments.

There did remain significant concerns within the Department of Employment about that opening up job centres more widely to private temporary agencies (ET/14/339/2) Comments made by regional managers within the Department of Employment reveal that some felt that this was 'promoting the competition' too much and went against the

'natural and long-standing reluctance to do business with our competitors' (ET/14/339/1). Furthermore, with the widespread privatisation of many publicly run services over the second half of the 1980s, some felt that co-operating with private agencies on placement activities could be the first step towards wholesale privatisation.

The changing political and economic environment were key explanatory factors behind the greater enthusiasm for co-operation with private agencies in the late 1980s. In its 1987 General Election manifesto, the Conservatives had pledged to implement a stricter benefit regime and having won that Election it developed plans in 1988 and 1989 to connect more explicitly the benefit and placement functions of the employment service (ET/14/339/2). A key aspect of this was the development of a stricter, more punitive job search regime, whereby unemployed benefit claimants would need to demonstrate that they were undertaking a wider set of job search activities. Registering with a private employment agency was identified as a new demonstrable indicator of job search. In this context, the displaying of private temporary agency vacancies was seen as a welcome step, facilitating and encouraging jobseekers to try every possible source of jobs (ET/14/339/1).

For the first time, the possibility of agencies being more actively involved in partnering with the state on placement and job counselling activities was also considered. A number of private agencies, including Alfred Marks and Manpower, were regularly contacting the Department of Employment over 1988 and 1989, in a coordinated campaign promote their specialist job counselling expertise (ET/14/339/2). Ministers and senior managers within the Department of Employment felt that private agencies could provide a genuine help in finding work for the long-term unemployed. This included the possibility of agencies running schemes in local area to help retrain the long-term unemployed and provide them with bespoke assistance with rewriting their Curriculum Vitae, and support in looking for work. Whilst these partnerships were not implemented until the 1990s, they were being more actively considered by the state in 1988 and 1989, with much of the previous reluctance to engage with private agencies receding by the end of the decade. A similar situation can be observed in Australia, in the early 1990s, when the job placement and job-support activities previously undertaken by the state-run Commonwealth Employment Service became subject to greater competition, with the private sector able to tender to run or partner with the government on delivery of these services (O'Donnell 2003; Considine et al. 2011).

Discussion and conclusion

By the end of the 1980s, the relationship between the private sector temporary employment agency and the state in the UK had evolved markedly. The lobbying activities of private agencies, both individually, and through their main employer body, did appear to impact upon attitudes within government towards the role of private agencies. Lobbying efforts focused on seeking to clarify and highlight the role of agencies, and utilised ongoing efficiency reviews within government as well as the economic environment (high unemployment at the start and the middle of the 1980s, and low unemployment at the end of the 1980s) as a means of seeking to persuade key actors within government to cooperate more with private agencies, and to scale back the role of the state in job placement. The economic and political environment of the 1980s is very important to understanding how attitudes (and

policies) towards private agencies did change. At the start of the 1980s, tracking high and rising unemployment was a key priority within the Department of Employment, and this led to some tentative engagement and cooperation with private agencies as a means of trying to address high unemployment. However, many within government still felt that private agencies would still, ultimately, be competed out of existence with the development of a more effective, full-service state-run employment service, covering both temporary and permanent placements. By the end of the 1980s, there was much greater acceptance of the functions and role of private agencies, and greater willingness to consider partnerships and cooperation. This stemmed partly from the more benign economic climate, but also partly from the changing political climate and the desire within government to more explicitly connect benefit payment with job search activities, and to put in place a more punitive welfare regime.

This case helps to highlight exactly how archival research can produce impactful insights around work and employment. During the 1980s, dominant theories that considered the use by employers of temporary agencies, notably the flexible firm model and transactions costs economics, paid no attention to the actions of employment agencies. Instead, agencies were viewed as a passive intermediary, brokering demands from employers with supplies of workers. This case study reveals how agencies actively lobbied government, and how economic and political conditions, alongside the actions of labour market actors are essential to understand the development of the temporary employment agency industry. This consideration of context, the paper argues, is important for understanding the historical development of a particular phenomenon in work and employment, such as temporary employment agencies. However, it is also important to understand contemporary dynamics, with partnerships between the state and private employment agencies now commonplace, and with private agencies bidding and contracting with the state for the delivery of job placement (in the UK, Australia and elsewhere). The historical analysis undertaken for this paper has pointed to a range of factors that might be looked at when considering contemporary relationships between the state and private agencies, such as the role of lobbying, attitudes within government towards private agencies, as well as how the prevailing economic and political climate shapes these relations. Close and careful consideration and analysis of archival data, the paper has argued, can provide the foundations for impactful research in this, and a range of other fields of work and employment.

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